

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY FOR COEXISTENCE

WITH THE MONTANA BEAVER WORKING GROUP

by

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Despite beavers' recent surge in popularity, prevailing negative attitudes and the persistence of beaver removal practices remain obstacles for those advocating living with beavers. The Montana Beaver Working Group (BWG) advances beavers' role in ecological and community resilience through members' collaborative efforts, including beaver-related restoration and conflict resolution projects. Bringing together people with diverse values and perspectives, the BWG builds collective understanding, develops a holistic vision for beavers in Montana, and supports members in pursuing it. As the group's impacts and membership have grown, so too has their need to adapt. For my Civic Engagement Project, I strengthened the BWG's organizational capacity and public image by taking the lead in designing and facilitating a collaborative process to develop their first formal charter. The resulting charter—enthusiastically supported by members—articulates the BWG's identity, mission, guiding principles, and governance structure in ways that accurately reflect their values, commitments, and collaborative practices. By clarifying what the BWG is and how they operate, the charter provides a clear foundation for member engagement and public outreach. This project illuminates how relationships, attention, and inclusive collaboration can help reconcile conflicting mindsets and environmental values, reshaping our relationships with the land and its inhabitants. By fostering moral attention, dialogue, and respect for diverse perspectives, the BWG models a practical and ethical transition from a logic of domination toward one of coexistence. Their efforts show how communities with a shared vision can co-create resilient landscapes that sustain both humans and the more-than-human world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. BACKGROUND CONTEXT AND PLAN	3
Beavers' History, Ecology, and Socio-Political Status	3
Moving from Domination to Coexistence	5
Project Plan: Developing the Montana Beaver Working Group Charter	8
3. THEORETICAL APPLICATIONS	10
3.1 ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY	10
Intrinsic vs Instrumental Value	10
Moral Extensionism, Hierarchical Dualisms, and Ecofeminism	12
The Power of Experience and Importance of Story	15
The Montana Beaver Working Group's Environmental Ethics	16
3.2 ISSUES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE	19
Conceptualizing Nature: from the Human-Nature Dualism to the Built Environment	20
Choosing our Direction: Ecomodernism, Rewilding, and Democratic Discussion	24
The Montana Beaver Working Group's Collaborative Vision for Our Entangled Future ..	27
3.3 TOPICS IN VALUE THEORY: ETHICS AND ATTENTION	30
Living in an Attention Economy	31
Iris Murdoch's Moral Concept of Attention	32
The Socio-Political Role of Attention	36
The Montana Beaver Working Group's Practices of Attention	39
The Montana Beaver Working Group Charter as a Product and Object of Attention	41
4. ACTIONS TAKEN	44
5. ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES	47
REFERENCES	51
APPENDIX A: MONTANA BEAVER WORKING GROUP CHARTER	A-1

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite beavers' recent surge in popularity, prevailing negative attitudes towards beavers and their associated beaver removal practices remain obstacles to those who advocate living with them and practicing beaver restoration. Over the past decade, the Montana Beaver Working Group (BWG), which endeavors to expand and progress work with beavers for ecological health and resilience through beaver-related conflict resolution and restoration, made considerable progress towards its goals and experienced growth in membership. Alongside these tremendous achievements arose an increasing need for the group to organizationally adapt. On the one hand, BWG members expressed a desire for the group to develop more robust governance structures and internal communications processes. On the other hand, despite the BWG's commitment to inclusive and respectful engagement across diverse perspectives and worldviews, recent membership growth has brought only limited representation from some key interest groups.

Through my Civic Engagement Project (CEP), I focused on supporting the BWG's organizational capacity and strengthening their public image by developing their first formal charter. I facilitated their full charter development process: designing the process itself, gathering background information, drafting the document, managing member feedback, and coordinating with the group to ensure members stayed informed and involved throughout. In the end, we collaboratively created a charter which codified the BWG's identity and mission, outlined their guiding principles, clarified their governance and operating structure, and strengthened their internal and external communications. By making explicit the group's intentions, values, commitments, and processes for realizing their goals, the charter enables them to publicize this information, benefiting their members and outreach activities. Through the development of the charter, I gained awareness of the BWG's needs and the elements they could integrate into their

work in order to successfully nourish their collaborative practices and support their members' ability to advance the group's goals.

At its core, this project is about *helping people pay closer attention, talk to each other, and value different perspectives through sustainable collaborative processes*. This fits within the broader work of exploring how conflicting environmental values—such as valuing nature for what it provides us versus valuing nature for its own sake—might be reconciled through relationships. The BWG is trying to do just this. Through the BWG, people with different values, perspectives, and worldviews come together to engage collaboratively around controversial beaver-related topics. They do not elevate beavers (or any other being) above other members of the socio-ecological community, nor do they accept our domination of beavers and of landscapes within their historical range. The BWG and its members' work is grounded in a culture of respect and inclusivity; integrated into place, community, and culture; and backed by a scientific understanding of ecology. Altogether, the BWG's values and collaborative processes have profound environmental, socio-political, and philosophical significance.

2. BACKGROUND CONTEXT AND PLAN

Beavers' History, Ecology, and Socio-Political Status

The modern history of the American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is inseparable from the *colonial* and *capitalist* history of European westward expansion in North America.¹ Driven by the profits of selling beaver pelts to hat- and perfume-making Europeans, the industrial fur trade quickly spread across the continent trapping beavers and destroying beaver dams. By the end of the 1800s, the estimated 60 to 400 million beavers living in North America before European colonization had been trapped to near extinction, devastating ecosystems (Gale 2025). While subsequent shifts in land and beaver management have supported significant recovery of beaver populations and their ecological benefits, humans remain beavers' greatest predator.

Although beaver behavior produces numerous ecological advantages, their impacts often conflict with landowners' goals. By constructing dams, beavers modify their habitat to fit their needs, creating wetlands and playing a critical role in the healthy and diverse functioning of their ecosystems. These wetlands store, cool, and purify water; retain sediment; and promote vegetation growth; which in turn helps minimize erosion, mitigate downstream flooding, and provide habitat to other animals (FWP nd).² But beaver damming can also flood or otherwise damage property, compromising crops, timber, and human structures including roads and septic

¹ The history of beavers and their relationships with humans, importantly, did not begin with the arrival of Europeans. Beavers hold deep cultural significance for many North American indigenous Tribes, including the Blackfeet (who live in what is now northern Montana). As Blackfeet Tribal member and scholar Rosalyn LaPier (2017) explains, beaver is a teacher who gifted knowledge, spiritual power, and “medicine” to the people through a *beaver bundle* containing objects, teachings, stories, and songs. Receiving this bundle established a reciprocal obligation to beavers—an obligation the people traditionally upheld through ceremonies, prohibitions on harming beavers, and stewardship of beavers' waters. The Blackfeet recognize beavers' essential role in maintaining water sources on the arid plains and correspondingly associate them with renewal, problem-solving, patience, cooperation, and industriousness (Vaile 2025). Today, the Blackfeet Fish and Wildlife Department is working to revitalize both ecosystems and cultural relationships with beavers through their beaver restoration program (Vaile 2025).

² Throughout this portfolio, I use the term “animals” to refer specifically to non-human animals. While I recognize that humans are also animals, this shorthand is used solely for simplicity and carries no further conceptual claim. Likewise, I use “people” to refer to humans, without implying that only humans can qualify for personhood.

systems. I first learned about these potential threats to landowners' safety and livelihoods from Kyle Wonders (pers. comm., October 7, 2025), who previously worked as a technician for the National Wildlife Federation's (NWF) Beaver Conflict Resolution Program. He explained that even when beavers are not causing any tangible harm, damage, or hardship, their mere presence often provokes strong reactions from landowners. Some, he notes, are still deeply ingrained in a long-standing "shoot, shovel, and shut up" culture when it comes to managing beavers—regardless of whether their conflict is actual or merely perceived.

Despite these enduring negative perceptions, Wonders and members of the BWG shared with me that support for beavers, and related land management practices, has grown as their ecological and pragmatic³ benefits become more widely recognized. *Beaver restoration* encompasses most of these practices: beaver reintroduction, restoration of historic beaver habitat to encourage recolonization, and application of beaver mimicry techniques to restore beavers' ecosystem services sans-beavers (Ritter et al. 2023). It also integrates human-beaver conflict prevention and beaver damage mitigation strategies ranging from technical solutions to beaver removal.⁴ When working with landowners to settle conflicts, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and the NWF Beaver Conflict Resolution Program prioritize solutions which keep beavers on the landscape. If they decide removal is the best solution, they prefer to trap and relocate them non-lethally, though they remain open to "lethal control" as needed (FWP nd;

³ Beyond their ecological contributions, Leila Philip (2022) highlights the practical financial advantages of keeping beavers on the landscape: they provide landowners with free services. For example, supporting beavers' water and sediment storage is far cheaper than installing human-engineered stormwater retention ponds. Removing beavers through relocation or lethal trapping, by contrast, can be expensive—and if the habitat remains suitable, beavers will likely return, forcing the cycle to repeat.

⁴ Technical solutions include installing tree- and beaver-fencing to prevent beavers from felling trees and pond levelers—low-flow drainage outlets for beaver ponds that beavers do not notice—to prevent flooding (NWF nd-a).

NWF nd-a). In balancing diverse human and ecological values, it appears that their support for beavers' presence on the landscape is not absolute.

As BWG members can attest, both human-beaver conflicts and human-human conflicts regarding the socio-ecological role and ethical treatment of beavers remain prevalent. The practice of lethal trapping, for example, is a major point of contention among different (human) groups and has led to derisive and vitriolic conflict. Our cultural consciousness has not shifted to intrinsically valuing beavers and subsequently interacting with them in solely nonviolent ways. But I interpret beavers' rising popularity and changes in beaver management techniques as still demonstrating a shift away from considering beavers as enemies or commodities—as during the industrial fur trade—towards *strategic coexistence*. Our choice, now, is about *how* to move forward: how can we minimize future conflict and harm, not only for humans? How can we balance the values of diverse beings as we form, communicate with, and move forward as communities? Conflict around beavers and trapping is a conflict between different ways of understanding the world. It brings to the forefront the different ways people consider animals' moral value and humans' ethical obligations—which is, at its heart, a question about who we are and how we relate to others.

Moving from Domination to Coexistence

As it drove westward expansion, colonialism laid the groundwork for how we relate to the land and its inhabitants. The colonial mindset follows a *logic of domination* that justifies and normalizes the oppression of anyone or anything considered “other” or “less than” us (Warren 1990). If animals remain outside our moral community, we will continue to dominate them however we see fit—impacting, controlling, and even killing them merely for our own interests. Although we still live in a colonial culture, recognition of beavers' power and importance is

already shifting some people away from this logic of domination and laying the groundwork for coexistence. Coexistence shifts our relationship with animals by acknowledging them as part of our communities and recognizing the value of living in shared landscapes.

As Wonders described, beavers' transformational consequences make it difficult for many landowners to value—let alone accept—living with them. I have come to understand that many farmers, ranchers, and rural communities perceive the beavers' presence similarly to that of predators like wolves: as threatening not only their safety and livelihoods but their entire way of life. According to philosopher Martin Drenthen (2021), because rural lifeways are inescapably vulnerable to natural events such as floods, droughts, and predation, they often revolve around cultivating and managing the land—that is, working to exert control over wildness. This life of “facing up to the encroaching wild” both expresses and ingrains values of independence and autonomy (428). Because wild predators and land-modifying beavers are perceived as uncontrollable, their presence “undermines that feeling of being autonomous” (429). Consequently, the sense of threat they evoke becomes deeply entrenched, intertwined with threats people perceive to their identities. In order to move towards coexistence, then, we must carefully navigate these complex emotions and nuanced realities.

Through my research, I have come to believe that finding a middle ground between domination and coexistence may be both possible and the most productive place to start. A first step toward calming people's reactions and reducing human-beaver conflict could be as simple as changing our language. Just as each landowner has their own threshold of tolerance for beaver impacts, they likewise have different emotional reactions to the terms *coexistence* and *living with beavers*. Elissa Chott (pers. comm., February 19, 2026), a Fellow with the NWF's Beaver Conflict Resolution Program, told me that she has observed that landowners who experience

significant beaver impacts can struggle with the very idea of coexistence. She described how for them, coexistence “implies that neither party is injured,” conveying the sense that all parties are happily and harmoniously sharing the landscape without difficulty.⁵ But this idealized scenario does not match their personal experiences of hardship caused by beaver activity. Beaver flooding can make roads inaccessible, ruin crops, and take hours of work in chest-deep water to mitigate; the trees they drop can sever power lines and damage buildings. Managing these impacts, Chott explained, is not peaceful and does not *feel* like coexistence.⁶

Chott expressed that many landowners who do not (or cannot) align with the term coexistence feel otherwise ambivalent about beavers—as long as beavers are not causing them problems. In her experience, the phrase *living with beavers* is “tolerated better across a broader audience” because it is understood as “a statement of fact—they are all there on the landscape and we are also living here.” This does not mean these landowners have reached a state of complete or joyful coexistence—since “you can tolerate something and still not like it”—but they have at least accepted beavers’ presence on the landscape. They tolerate living with beavers.

Even if begrudging, such tolerance expresses a shift in mindset, values, and behavior. In these cases, recognizing the value of the landscape and the animals who live upon it does not necessarily mean those values will always override human interests. Rather, it signals a willingness to pay attention to and consider more-than-human values. This shift opens the possibility for us to move from domination to existence, reimagining our relationships with previously dominated animals and cultivating environmentally beneficial practices for living—or coexisting—on shared landscapes. Over the course of my project, I came to appreciate how

⁵ Chott says some landowners’ intolerance of “coexistence” can be fueled by the term’s association with “greenies.”

⁶ While this is generally the case, Chott also encounters landowners whose reactions are far more relaxed. She recalls one landowner who ignored her advice to wrap their trees; later, after “the beavers dropped an aspen on a \$12,000 gazebo,” the landowner “laughed and said she should have wrapped the trees when [Chott] suggested it!”

collaboration offers a way forward. Through collaborative processes, people can develop a clearer understanding one another's viewpoints, discover common ground, and work together to craft original solutions to difficult environmental conversations.

Project Plan: Developing the Montana Beaver Working Group Charter

I connected with the BWG hoping to ground my CEP in an organization that embodied the collaborative environmental values I sought to advance. The BWG provides a collaborative forum for Montanans doing beaver-related work to communicate and coordinate their efforts in order to support beaver management, restoration, conflict resolution, policy, research, and education across the state. Their membership consists of representatives from state and federal land management agencies, Tribes, conservation groups, restoration professionals, ecologists, trappers, and private landowners (e.g., ranchers and farmers). The BWG and its members endeavor to realize their mission to “connect people and share resources to elevate the vital role of beavers in Montana’s ecosystems.” While the BWG encourages restoring beavers to their historic range, where appropriate, they make sure to attend to nuance. They simultaneously recognize the numerous benefits beavers bring to our landscapes and acknowledge potential conflicts between beavers and human interests.

The BWG’s work is steered by the Montana Beaver Action Plan (Action Plan), which has guided members as they advance beaver-related work throughout the state. Collaboratively revised every three years, the Action Plan captures members’ ongoing efforts and outlines future work, but it does not articulate what the BWG *as an entity* actually is or does. Recognizing that the Action Plan could neither provide the organizational identity and structure the group needed nor articulate their inclusive intent, members added the development of a charter to the 2023

Action Plan (BWG 2023). Yet by the time members began discussing the 2026 Action Plan update and revision, no progress had been made toward a BWG charter (NWF 2025).

I learned about the BWG's stalled charter effort while supporting their Action Plan update, work I undertook as the practicum for my Natural Resource Conflict Resolution (NRCR) Graduate Certificate.⁷ Seeing an opportunity to further support the group, I stepped in to help move their charter development forward. Because members have limited time to engage in BWG activities alongside their full-time jobs, I was able to provide the leadership, initiative, structure, capacity, and writing expertise they needed to design and lead the charter development process. Throughout my project, I attended regular BWG meetings, convened charter-focused meetings, facilitated conversations with the group's Leadership Team, and presented at all-member meetings. For the charter itself, I started by developing a charter proposal, then iteratively drafted, solicited feedback on, and revised the document. Once I finalized the charter, the BWG published it on their website and distributed it to their full membership.

⁷ My NRCR practicum project focused on supporting Alexis Gibson and Heather Stokes, contractors with the University of Montana's Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy, in their facilitation of the BWG's 2025–2026 Action Planning process. This work culminated in the 2026 Montana Beaver Action Plan.

3. THEORETICAL APPLICATIONS

3.1 ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

The first seminar that shaped my project was *Environmental Philosophy*, which traced many of the prominent topics and debates that have characterized the field since its inception roughly 50 years ago. The course examined theories of value and moral considerability that provide foundations for environmental ethics, beginning with early environmental philosophers who sought to establish a theoretical basis for the ethical consideration of nature.

Intrinsic vs Instrumental Value

Philosophers such as Richard Routley (1973), proposed creating an entirely *new* ethics. Routley maintained that the historic ethical paradigm, mainly derived from utilitarian and deontological traditions, focuses on exclusively anthropocentric value (both value-of-humans and value-to-humans). These traditions rely on what he calls *basic human chauvinism*, the idea that “humans, or people, come first and everything else is a bad last” (207). By elevating humans in this way, he argued, historic traditions promote the instrumentalization of nature and prevent the establishment of non-anthropocentric value in nature—they cannot become *environmental* ethics because they offer no protection for nature against human interference. Yet Routley and others agreed that we intuitively recognize nature’s non-anthropocentric value: even if humans and our needs are removed, we consider nature valuable. So environmental philosophers sought to establish nature’s *intrinsic value*—its value in and of itself—to justify these intuitions and shift from merely considering nature’s instrumental value to recognizing our ethical obligations to it.

Following the trajectory of the field, we learned about Holmes Rolston’s (1971;1994) early account of intrinsic value. Rolston located intrinsic value in deep geological time, arguing

that the embedded processes through which nature—and humans—emerged are themselves value-generating. He maintained that all living organisms value things instrumentally, using them for their own benefit to sustain their own lives and the life of their kind (species). Their treatment of their own lives as goods in and of themselves reveals that they value themselves intrinsically. Rolston saw this pattern mirrored in ecosystems: they create, sustain, and diversify life, demonstrating that they produce value through *normative*, directional processes. Because the world—and the lives that emerge from it—is *able to produce value*, it is value-able, and thus *valuable*. Humans, as the sentient offspring of these emergent processes, participate in this larger story of valuing; the “creativity within the natural system we inherit, and the values this generates, are the ground of our being” (1994, 28). Our philosophical valuing is simply the latest development in this process. On Rolston’s view, value is intrinsic to the world itself.

I came to understand that Rolston’s account of intrinsic value is one of many, each grounded in different metaphysical commitments, practical concerns, and philosophical aims.⁸ Despite the difficulties introduced by this conceptual multiplicity, intrinsic value remains a central criterion for answering Routley’s call for a new environmental ethics. An influential example comes from the forester Aldo Leopold (1987) who, in his famous “Land Ethic” essay, located intrinsic value in the larger ecosystems within which humans are entangled. On this basis, he argued that we must extend our *moral community* to reflect our ecological reality, shifting from domineering owners of the land to members of the ecological community. This shift has concrete implications: if beavers, for example, are brought into our moral community,

⁸ Many philosophers have problematized intrinsic value and its conceptual multiplicity, raising concerns about its metaphysical coherence (e.g., where intrinsic value is located), its tendency to obscure relationality (e.g., by treating value as a property of isolated objects), and its limited pragmatic usefulness for environmental action (McShane 2007). Given these issues, some philosophers argue that we should abandon the concept altogether.

we must recognize and respect our ethical obligations to them. But when beavers remain outside our moral community, we can own and control them merely for our own gain.

Moral Extensionism, Hierarchical Dualisms, and Ecofeminism

Leopold's use of intrinsic value, among other criteria, to determine the limits of our moral community facilitated my understanding of *moral extensionism*—the dominant framework for demarcating moral considerability. Moral extensionists employ existing ethical concepts to redefine what entities have value, how that value is accorded, and thereby expand our sphere of moral consideration (Nash 1989; Cuomo 1998). Proponents defend extensionism on historical grounds, arguing that it reflects how human moral communities have expanded over time as we recognize similarities or connections with others (e.g., to include slaves, women, and people of color) (Darwin 1871; Lecky 1890; Leopold 1987; Singer 2011; Sauer 2023). Accordingly, many environmental philosophers have pursued moral extensionism in their search for the “magical argument” that can help us take the next step and extend moral consideration to nature.⁹

While moral extensionism initially seemed to offer a reasonable foundation for developing an environmental ethic, I soon realized how problematic it can be. Extensionism explicitly separates those like “us” from “others”: you're either part of the moral community or *an Other*. Extending moral consideration to all “living” beings on the basis of their intrinsic value, for example, places value on the thing we share with them—life itself. This allows us to ignore [O]ther aspects of the land—like rocks, water, ecological communities, abiotic nutrient and energy cycles, and the rest of earth's systems—in our decision making, justifying their destruction. According to Thomas Birch (1993), the very establishment of criteria for moral considerability, involved in every extension, is itself a tool for *dominating* those deemed Other.

⁹ See Godfrey-Smith (1980), Taylor (1986), Singer (2011), and Sebo (2025).

Almost immediately, I connected Birch's critique to ecofeminism, which similarly highlights how moral extensionism supports domination (Plumwood 1991; Plumwood 1993; Warren 2000; Cuomo 1998; Gruen 2015). Ecofeminists argue that understanding any instance of domination (or oppression) requires examining the *oppressive conceptual frameworks* underlying *all* forms of domination—including that of women, nature and, more broadly, colonialism, speciesism, patriarchy, and other “-isms.”¹⁰ All of their conceptual frameworks rely on value-hierarchical logic that produces *hierarchical dualisms* such as men-above-women, people-above-nature, and reason-above-emotion (Warren 1990). Placing hierarchical value on criteria for moral considerability, whereby meeting the criteria equates to having value, creates a stark divide between the ingroup and outgroup. The resulting juxtaposition serves to ethically justify the separation and subsequent domination of the outgroup by the ingroup. No matter the criteria, Others remain left out. Moral extensionism, by defining criteria for moral considerability and placing boundaries around our moral community, ultimately reinforces the oppressive conceptual frameworks that sustain hierarchical dualisms and justify the domination of Others.

Partially in response to the problems created by using criteria for moral considerability, ecofeminists shift the locus of value from individual entities to the *relationships* between them. Warren (1990) established that although hierarchical dualisms harness difference to justify domination, *difference* itself “*does not breed domination*” (145). Domination arises only when the value-hierarchical logic of oppressive conceptual frameworks is applied to difference. Recognizing this, ecofeminists' solution is not to erase difference but to embrace it and value it relationally. Thus they reject the human-nature dualism by emphasizing how humans and nature

¹⁰ Birch (1990) similarly argues that a single oppressive system underpins imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and Western expansion, as well as science, religion, law, and land management. He refers to this system as the “imperium,” the dominant historical force of control within our culture which both creates and opposes otherness.

are profoundly different yet deeply entangled. This relational lens makes ethical behavior a matter of respecting and valuing nature's difference while acknowledging one's entanglement with it such that ethics manifest contextually as "expression[s] of self-in-relationship" (Plumwood 1991, 9). An ecofeminist framework of value therefore emerges from relationships as inclusive (embraces difference), pluralistic (recognizes multiple moral values and principles), and non-reductionist (irreducible to universal principles).¹¹ Living in accordance with this framework requires attention to context, particularity, relational values, and moral emotions including care, love, and reciprocity (Warren 1990; Plumwood 1991; Slicer 1991). This relational and contextual pluralism allows ecofeminists to avoid extensionism's issues with hierarchy and domination by grounding ethical behavior in *how* we relate to others.

Learning about ecofeminists' relational ethics gave language and theoretical grounding for my intuitions. In my experience, moral concern for others, whether human or non-human, is more often cultivated through relationships of care rather than adherence to criteria like intrinsic value. Leopold (1987) expressed this relational dynamic, claiming that "we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in" (214). I came to recognize that many environmental philosophers share this sentiment. Rolston (1988), for instance, maintained that in order to defend the earth, we need to fall in love with it and see its marvelousness—and to fall in love with it, we need to engage with it.

¹¹ Ecofeminists such as Warren (1990) claim that universal ethics are not actually preferable. She contends that the "rational" and "objective" points of view underpinning universal principles—which "assum[e] that there is 'one voice' in terms of which ethical values, beliefs, attitudes, and conduct can be assessed"—actually reflect the non-objective perspectives of those in power (139). Objectivity becomes a tool of oppression when it forces people to conform to universal principles, a process that silences their voices and erases their perspectives. Recognizing this, ecofeminists accept non-objectivity and seek to offer a "better bias" by privileging the voices of the oppressed (140).

The Power of Experience and Importance of Story

Reading Thomas Birch and Henry Bugbee deepened my grasp of how experience can reveal value. Rejecting pre-defined moral values and criteria for moral considerability, Birch (1993) instead offers a practice of *universal moral consideration* grounded in an unrestricted openness to discovering previously undefined moral value through experience. He describes moments in which we feel addressed by another being—or even a place—and have a *deontic experience* of realizing its significance and our obligations to it, recognizing that we “*must* do something” or are “called upon to do something” (322).¹² Bugbee (1974) similarly describes moments of deep listening in which we are radically open, present, and embodied, and find ourselves addressed by the world as it reveals itself. Such participatory encounters with things beyond ourselves “[give] the lie to” our ordinary lives, bringing a truer sense of who we are and of the meaning found in our interactions (618). Birch and Bugbee depict moral value as disclosed through experiential engagement, grounding ethical responsibility sans predetermined criteria.

Reading ecofeminist Val Plumwood’s (1995) account of narrowly escaping a crocodile attack clarified for me the power of deontic-type experiences. Her encounter revealed to her the depth of human vulnerability and our place in the more-than-human world. It also moved her to advocate listening to the “messages and warnings” we receive through our senses, bodies, and other forms of perception “not necessarily accountable in our present frameworks of rationality” (34). Plumwood’s emphasis on experiential disclosure aligns with Birch and Bugbee’s view that deontic-type experiences *compel* us to *testify* to the ethical calls we receive from the world.

¹² Birch (1993) identifies deontic experience as the “original source” that inspires, yet is insufficient to determine, our values and ethical obligations (322). We must also draw on our “practical ethical knowledge” to reflectively realize “what we feel we must do” (323). While some deontic experiences immediately feel significant, others require substantial reflection, enabling us to discover, confirm, or revise our assumed ethical obligations in relation to our experience. Although Birch denies that there is a single right way to consider any entity, he insists that there are right ways to *respond*—ways discoverable only through reflection.

When we experience eloquent reality in depth, it calls us to respond (Bugbee 1974). Heeding this call, we testify to experience to “explain and justify, and prove to others, our ethical judgements and practices” (Birch 1993, 323). Under this view, moral consideration and practice arise first through experience; only after do we articulate reasons for what we are already moved to do.

Story became a central theme in our class discussions, especially as a way of articulating the post-experience form of ethical reasoning illustrated by Plumwood. An environmental ethic grounded in experience can only be justified through the testimonial story of its emergence, not through the rational arguments typical of extensionist ethics. Whereas rational argument reflects a logic of domination by relying on *force* to prove claims, testimony and story express openness and *invite* others to listen, consider, and change their practices. Rolston (1988) likewise emphasizes the importance of story: ethics is, for him, the story of the emergent processes, prior to and beyond us, that shaped us into moral beings, moving us from *is* to *ought*. Through story, “the ethic becomes an epic,” that teaches us the guiding principles of deep time as they are revealed in natural processes and the world around us (342). Through this course, I came to see environmental ethics as the work of telling a new story—one that recognizes nature’s value, reflects our ecological reality, centers relationships, and articulates our lived experiences.

The Montana Beaver Working Group’s Environmental Ethics

The BWG expresses a recognition of intrinsic value that mirrors Leopold’s, revealed by their Guiding Principle “Recognition of Ecosystem Values.” Their charter states that they “value healthy ecosystems and the socio-ecological benefits they provide,” thereby recognizing both the intrinsic value of healthy ecosystems—their value in and of themselves—and their instrumental value. They add that while they “explicitly recognize the contributions of beavers to ecosystem function, watershed resilience, and climate adaptation, [they] ground [their] decisions in a

holistic understanding of ecosystem health rather than a single-species focus.” This ecocentrism aligns with Rolston and Leopold, who locate intrinsic value in species and the systems on which they depend. By recognizing the intrinsic value of beavers as a species and of the ecosystems they inhabit, the BWG endeavors to help both—even if that involves harming individual beavers.

In accordance with the ecofeminist ethics, the BWG also demonstrates inclusive, pluralistic, and non-reductionist practices. They embrace difference, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds and creating an inclusive meeting space for listening to one another’s perspectives. Their collaborative decisions reflect this plurality. Rather than grounding their support of beavers in any singular criterion, they acknowledge multiple forms of value—including intrinsic value, ecological function, and cultural significance—and recognize that in different contexts, different values are appropriate for guiding their actions. Their Action Plan also reflects non-reductionism: since ethical land and beaver management cannot be reduced to universal standards that apply everywhere, many actions apply only to specific locations or organizations, yet each is understood as contributing to the broader whole.

The BWG’s work is also *fundamentally relational*, reflecting the ecofeminist insight that ethical behavior is measured by the quality of our relationships. Their collaborative practices cultivate inclusive and respectful relationships between members and recognize that everyone—and everything—is embedded in relational networks. Beavers, for instance, are entangled with water, trees, soil, other creatures, and the humans who own and manage the land they inhabit. The group’s relational awareness helps them resist a logic of domination as they shift from controlling beavers for human ends to managing them only as needed to support coexistence.

The BWG’s practices further align with Birch and Bugbee’s view that experience grounds ethical obligations. Emphasizing experience and story over forceful argument, they create a

space where members learn from one another by sharing experiences and other explanatory narratives. They approach their work with curiosity and openness, paying close attention and remaining receptive to the possible emergence of unexpected findings that may reveal value or shift their understanding. Rather than using forceful arguments to persuade people to adopt particular views, they invite people into relationship with one another, with beavers, and with beaver-shaped landscapes through meetings, outreach, and field work. Together, the members of the BWG are writing a new story—one grounded in relationality rather than domination. Although their consideration, in Leopold’s (1987) words, “cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use” of the land, it still “affirms” the right of the land-community to “continued existence” (204). Recognizing that valuing the land does not mean its interests will always override human ones, they ground their decisions in reflective, relational, and experiential engagement with one another and the landscape they serve.

3.2 ISSUES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The second seminar that shaped my project was Christopher Preston’s Spring 2024 *Issues in the Anthropocene*. Before we could engage with the course’s main theoretical ideas, we first needed a clear sense of what the *Anthropocene* refers to. The term generally denotes the modern period in which human environmental impacts have reached a global scale. It was introduced in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who argued that “the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” warranted recognizing that we had entered a new geological epoch distinct from the Holocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 484). Eight years later, the Anthropocene Working Group was established to evaluate the geological legitimacy of this proposal. To designate the epoch, they were tasked with identifying a “marker” level in the earth’s strata that demonstrated, unequivocally, that the layers above were “functionally” and “stratigraphically” distinct from the Holocene layers below (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010).

Throughout the course, we explored the implications of such a designation, focusing on how the Anthropocene challenges traditional environmental philosophy by situating us in a “post-natural” and “post-wild” world. But about halfway through our semester, the Working Group voted that the Anthropocene should not be formalized as a new geological epoch (Ellis 2024). They claimed that their decision, made on technical grounds, was not a denial of humans’ transformational planetary impacts (Ellis 2024). After this announcement, the course shifted to examining the implications of the Anthropocene concept regardless of its geological ratification.

Our shift reflected a broader reality: even without formal status, the term Anthropocene has spread across disciplines and popular discourse as a way to describe the unprecedented scale of modern human-directed environmental change. Our impacts are visible everywhere. Industrial growth—including urban sprawl, agriculture, deforestation, and mining—produces biological,

chemical, and geomorphological effects, transforming landscapes, leaching chemicals, and altering processes such as erosion (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). Rising greenhouse gas emissions have increased atmospheric temperatures, driving sea-level rise, ocean acidification, species migration and extinction, and widespread ecosystem disruption (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). In short, *we are terraforming our own planet*. Our influence is now felt in every part of the world.

I came to understand that the Anthropocene tells a story about who we are and how we relate to the world around us. Prior to the Anthropocene, it was easier to separate human affairs from natural history: the earth was a backdrop upon which human history progressed.¹³ By pronouncing that this backdrop has been fundamentally shaped by humans, the Anthropocene challenges traditional ideas of nature as separate from humans and raises questions about our environmental role, both historically and moving forward. I became particularly interested in how the idea of the Anthropocene unsettles the presumed human-nature dualism and reshapes our awareness of our choices and responsibilities as agents of planetary change.

Conceptualizing Nature: from the Human-Nature Dualism to the Built Environment

Reading Bill McKibben (1989) revealed the traditional dualistic concept of nature that characterized it as agentic, wild, and radically separate from humans. McKibben believed that humans and nature—or nature and culture—are so diametrically opposed that “nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us” (58). This dualism grew from the colonial assumptions of North American explorers who “discovered” what they imagined to be

¹³ Some scholars have argued that the term “Anthropocene” obscures responsibility by blaming *all* humans for the harms of a powerful few. Several alternatives have been proposed to center particular aspects of our time, including: *Plantationocene* or *Obscene* for the oppressive practices that relocated crops and people, forced slave labor, and transformed diverse, connected landscapes into extractive, enclosed plantations (Haraway et al. 2016). *Capitalocene* for historical capitalism as a global ecological regime that exploits “Cheap Natures” to accumulate power and capital (Moore 2017). *Chthulucene* for “the dynamic ongoing sym-chthonic [earthen] forces and powers” that sustain life—ours included—and are now threatened by the “severe discontinuities” the world faces (Haraway 2015, 160). *The Dithering* for our indecision and inaction (Haraway 2015, referencing Kim Stanley Robinson).

“untouched wilderness.” Within the logic of colonization, wilderness was defined negatively by the absence of people—that is, of “civilized” people. This definition rendered indigenous people less than human and led to the violent erasure of their presence and impactful relationships with the land (Plumwood 1998). Made “pristine” through this violence (and its subsequent erasure from collective memory), wilderness was then praised as a sacred, inhuman manifestation of the romantic and the sublime. The Wilderness Act of 1964 reinforced this human-nature divide by classifying wilderness as “untrammeled” land with a “primeval character,” suitable only for temporary human visitation (§1132c). Wilderness as a place without humans is a thus historical construction—produced through violence, erasure, and law—that never existed in material reality (Cronon 1996). Yet this idea persists as an apparently self-evident truth, continuing to uphold the ideal of a separate, untouched nature.

I soon came to realize that traditional environmentalists’ protection of nature ultimately reproduced this ideal’s dualism, since protecting nature required preserving the very separation between humans and the “natural” world (Vogel 2015). For Eric Katz (1992), this dualistic concept accords with nature’s material reality such that any human interference strips nature of its autonomy and turns it into a human artifact. He argues that ecological restoration cannot undo this transformation because the original act of domination severs nature’s *continuous causal history*, effectively “destroying” it. Restoration—unable to repair that break—can only create “a false reality” that offers merely “the pleasant illusory appearance” of nature (240). Under this framework, as Katz demonstrates, nature must remain wholly untouched by humans; any human intervention is inherently polluting and seen as destroying nature itself.

When considered through this dualistic concept of nature, I found the Anthropocene particularly troubling. Whether or not we can perceive them, human trace effects are everywhere,

pervasive even places we still imagine as wild or untouched. This scale of intervention forces us to confront what Bill McKibben (1989) calls the *end of nature*: materially, independent nature no longer exists, having been destroyed through its contact with “our particular way of life” (60). Because we have broken the deep, continuous history of the earth’s once-autonomous natural processes, what we now experience as “nature,” he argues, is really “the awesome power of Mother Nature as altered by the awesome power of man” (60). On McKibben’s view, nature is gone and our material reality has fundamentally shifted. This shift throws the very *idea* of nature into question. Though McKibben observes that nature is “durable in our imaginations,” sustained by our ability to overlook degradation, he fears the idea may not withstand this magnitude of human impacts (58). But even in this “post-natural” world where the dualistic divide between humans and nature has collapsed, he still hopes the idea of nature will survive.

After McKibben, we turned to reading Steven Vogel (2015), who offers a sharply contrasting view: he argues that we should abandon the idea of nature because, rooted in dualism, it is *incoherent, false*, and ultimately *useless*. As soon as we question “nature,” explains Vogel, the conceptual incoherence of separating humans from nature becomes clear: if humans evolved from nature, we are natural. And if we are natural, then our artifacts—including our environmental impacts—are also natural. Thus, especially since our impacts are ubiquitous, there appears to be no meaningful line we can draw between nature and human artifact. Vogel thinks we shouldn’t even try. This inability, he claims, is not a symptom of the Anthropocene but evidence that “nature,” as a world separate from humans, never existed in the first place—there only is, and only ever has been, the *built environment*. So he dismantles the human-nature dualism. Vogel argues that everything we call natural is socially and materially constructed through human practices, and everything we build is likewise “natural” because this construction

relies on *wild* processes. All matter retains “wild,” unpredictable forces that operate beyond our control, so our artifacts inevitably affect the world in ways that exceed our intentions. But this wildness, he stresses, does not absolve us of responsibility for them.

Vogel argues that traditional environmental philosophy, by contrast, allows us to evade responsibility for our impacts. He maintains that, with its fixation on a nonexistent, dualistic ideal of “nature” and its denial of artifacts’ moral significance, it exemplifies the mindset that has led us to degrade our environment. While I was initially shocked by this claim, I soon came to understand his perspective. Under the human-nature dualism, respect for nature remains confined to the supposedly “pristine” nature that only exists *out there* in the wilderness (Cronon 1996; Plumwood 1998). As a result, we overlook the value present in our everyday environments and fail to recognize and evaluate the impacts of our practices. By continuing to call the environment “nature,” we also remain oblivious to the Vogelian fact that the entire world is built. All of this, for Vogel, makes the idea of nature not only impractical but unethical because it distracts us from attending to the built environment that actually demands our concern. In response, he emphasizes taking responsibility for our practices and caring for *all* environments, those considered both “natural” and “constructed.” Clinging to the idea of nature, Vogel insists, alienates us from the world and prevents us from recognizing and taking responsibility for our practices that shape it.

While I appreciated Vogel’s anti-dualism and emphasis on taking responsibility, I struggled to accept his call to abandon the idea of nature altogether, given its everyday usefulness and power to motivate environmental care and action. I found myself more aligned with Plumwood (1988), who argues that we can reject the human-nature dualism without relinquishing the idea of nature by creating “conceptual space for the interwoven continuum of nature and culture” (684). As an ecofeminist, Plumwood reconceives human-nature difference as

emerging from relational entanglement rather than strict separation—a shift that not only reflects our material reality but also enables us to acknowledge the presence of nature and wildness, to a greater or lesser extent, everywhere we go. Despite their differences, both Plumwood and Vogel agree that our idea of “nature,” especially in relation to humans, profoundly shapes how we understand and engage with the world.

Choosing our Direction: Ecomodernism, Rewilding, and Democratic Discussion

As my understanding of humans’ transformational power deepened, it became clear that navigating the Anthropocene requires careful reflection on our responsibilities. I learned that philosophers have drawn strikingly different conclusions about which practices we should adopt as we shape our planet’s collective future. While many echoed McKibben’s hopelessness, *ecomodernists* such as Emma Marris et al. (2011) instead see our future as rife with possibility:

The Anthropocene does not represent the failure of environmentalism. It is the stage on which a new, more positive and forward-looking environmentalism can be built. This is the Earth we have created, and we have a duty, as a species, to protect it and manage it with love and intelligence. It is not ruined. It is beautiful still, and can be even more beautiful, if we work together and care for it.

Ecomodernists agree with Vogel that humans’ unintentional alteration of the environment has been problematic and maintain that *intentional* intervention provides the solution. As such, they urge us to embrace our responsibility for improving the planet—not by preserving nature, but through deliberate technological design that centers human interests. Their post-naturalist, capitalist vision imagines social well-being and economic growth coinciding with ecological flourishing by “decoupling” from nature through urbanization, intensifying development to optimize resource efficiency, and sparing land (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015). Some take this logic so far as to advocate geoengineering through solar radiation management, de-extinction through biotechnology, and exterminating native species through gene editing.

Reading David Nye's (2003) account of the *master narrative of second creation*—which promises that we can use technology to build a new, desirable world—provided a useful lens for interpreting ecomodernist claims. Nye shows how American settlers' stories portrayed them as exploring an unfinished world and transforming it toward perfection, celebrating the people and technologies that realized this second creation. These stories rested on capitalist assumptions that labor both marked progress and entitled settlers to land; and they erased, rather than protected, whatever settlers could not understand, value, or assimilate. Considered against this master narrative, ecomodernist stories reveal their alignment with it. By framing the world as in need of saving and improving, and by positioning technological advancement as the best path forward, they cast their project of planetary design as a contemporary second creation set on the Anthropocene's stage. But Nye's account illuminates that this vision of constructing a revitalized world of economic, social, and ecological promise ultimately reproduces the colonial and capitalist logics of domination embedded in the original stories. So too does it fail to transform our relationship with the land—a task that Nye insists requires fundamentally different stories.

I came to see *rewilding* as offering such an opportunity to craft new stories that shift our logics and relationships with the more-than-human world. Rewilding encompasses a range of practices that generally center around helping nature regain its autonomy by reducing human intervention and ongoing management (Gammon 2018; DeVroey 2023). Rewilding, on Linde DeVroey's (2023) account, transforms the nostalgia for an unrestorable past nature, criticized by Katz, into a *future-oriented nostalgia for home*—a longing to belong to and be embedded in an imagined future place. In a world where many people lack the historical engagement with place that once anchored our sense of belonging, she explains, nostalgia shifts from yearning to restore what was to yearning for a future in which such embeddedness might be realized. Rewilding

describes the process of envisioning and constructing such a future home for humans and nature alike by creating space for human intention to coexist with nature's autonomy in "a wilder, more dynamic and self-regulating natural world" (Gammon 2018, 340). As such, rewilding invites us to heal our relationships with—rather than further alienate ourselves from—the independent organisms, cultures, and processes that, interwoven with human needs and practices, form the living fabric of places we can belong to and call home. Although this concept of rewilding leaves many practical questions and decisions unresolved, it nonetheless offers a powerful framework for imagining and co-creating new hybrid landscapes for our shared future.

Reading about philosophers' proposed practices for shaping the planet's future left me wondering how we decide—a question that Vogel (2015) answers with a call to democratic discourse. Humans, he claims, are the *only* "creatures capable of speaking for themselves" and "requesting ... accepting or rejecting the justifications" that legitimize our choices (197). This positions humans as the only beings capable of participating in collective decision-making and, therefore, of determining our future world-building practices. He advocates democratic discursive practices "in which the actors *acknowledge and take communal responsibility for their transformative effects on the world*" (231). Such practices, he argues, enable us to set shared goals, freely commit to them, hold one another accountable, and cultivate "a social willingness" to do things differently (231). For Vogel, then, democratic discourse is our only means of deciding how we can collectively build a better world for all the creatures who inhabit it.

This course revealed to me four ways in which we should reconsider our environmental responsibilities. First, as ecomodernists and Vogel argue, we should recognize the harms we have caused as toxic artifacts of our practices and accept responsibility for changing those practices. Second, we should address the root of our problems, not just advance reactionary fixes. Donna

Haraway (2016) argues that efforts to secure specific imagined futures evade the real work of confronting our troubles, echoing Katz's claim that restoration (or ecomodernist techno-fixes) merely manages damage without preventing further harm. Haraway insists that we can only address the challenges of the Anthropocene by *staying with the trouble* of its complexity. Third, as Vogel, Plumwood, and Nye reveal, problems arise from the concepts and narratives that shape our relationships with the more-than-human world, so we should shift our mindsets. Both rethinking the idea of "nature" to reject its alienating dualism (and colonialism and capitalism) and revising the stories through which we imagine our place in the world can help us cultivate responsibility and envision a new shared future. Finally, we should transform our relational practices into ones that respond to the world's multiplicity, entanglement, and wild agency. We already build the world *with* the world as Vogelian wildness renders artifacts beyond our control. DeVroey offers an alternative to grasping for an illusion of control, maintaining that centering relationships with place reveals the possibility of realizing a rewilded future in which humans and nature intentionally co-create a home environment—a place of belonging—for us all.

The Montana Beaver Working Group's Collaborative Vision for Our Entangled Future

In alignment with Vogel, the BWG and its members acknowledge humans' historical role in shaping many of today's environmental problems and are likewise committed to building a better world through their collaborative and environmental practices. Although their efforts necessarily involve reactionary and technical interventions—particularly for resolving human-beaver conflicts and implementing restoration projects—these damage-management practices ultimately serve their broader goals. As their charter states, they endeavor to "support long-term ecological and community resilience," a commitment that reflects Haraway and Katz's focus on preventing further harm rather than merely responding to it. The goals and strategies outlined in

their Action Plan further demonstrate the group's dedication to affecting deeper, systemic change, as they prioritize approaches that address the social and institutional structures at the root of the socio-ecological challenges they confront. Their orientation toward situated work also aligns with Haraway's warning against fixed futures, for they do not pursue a specific or stable material outcome, as their charter underscores in stating that they "do not advocate for particular outcomes for particular projects." Instead, they seek to cultivate a collective relational vision for how we might value, and thereby coexist with, beavers.

To achieve this vision, the BWG's practices center around shifting the mindsets that foster human-beaver conflicts, a focus that reflects Vogel, Plumwood, and Nye's insights. Members pursue this transformation through environmental management, restoration projects, education and outreach, policy change, agency partnerships, and sustained collaborative dialogue. Their charter reflects members' mindset, as it describes the BWG as "grounded in strong relationships, shared learning, careful consideration of nuance, and sustainable socio-ecological practices." My experience working with members throughout this project has further shown me that they are particularly thoughtful about their environmental role.

The BWG also provides a forum for the kind of democratic discourse advocated by Vogel. Guided by the principle of inclusivity, the group intentionally creates space for human practitioners with diverse backgrounds and perspectives to connect with one another; share experiences, stories, and information; and deliberate together. In doing so, members collectively determine their future goals and the practices they will use to pursue them. The process of developing their charter has served as another forum for this kind of collaborative discussion, one that has encouraged them to refine and strengthen the practices that will guide their future interactions. Through my facilitation, they have reconsidered their purpose and the governance

and organizational structures that will support them in achieving their collective goals. The resulting charter articulates principles that guide their practices of engaging with one other and the Montana environment, including the human and more-than-human beings who inhabit it.

Though they use the term “restoration,” the BWG’s practices of envisioning and co-creating hybrid landscapes align more closely with DeVroey’s account of rewilding. The group’s goals do not draw sharp distinctions between human and natural environments, nor do they necessarily privilege either humans or beavers over the ecological systems they inhabit. Instead, their rhetoric acknowledges that both humans and beavers belong to Montana’s landscapes. While I came to appreciate this through my engagement with members, the charter also reflects this recognition, stating that they “support restoring beavers to their historic range, where appropriate, and recognize the numerous benefits beavers bring to the landscape while simultaneously acknowledging potential conflicts between human interests and beaver behavior.” By naming both the benefits beavers bring and the conflicts their presence can generate, the group embodies Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble.” This also illustrates how they unsettle the human-nature dualism: by acknowledging the hybrid nature of landscapes, by responding to the entanglement of humans, beavers, and other ecosystem components through coexistence strategies, and by recognizing beavers as agentic shapers of the environment. Taken together, BWG members’ mindsets, values, and practices offer a rewilded narrative of human-beaver relations—one in which humans and beavers are mutually entangled, co-constructing a Montana landscape to which all of us, human and beaver alike, belong and can call home.

3.3 TOPICS IN VALUE THEORY: ETHICS AND ATTENTION

The third seminar that shaped my project was Professor Bridget Clarke’s Fall 2023 *Topics in Value Theory: Ethics and Attention*. This course invited students to consider how the objects and quality of our attention play a vital role in determining our actions at both personal and societal scales. As we explored the increasing demands placed on attention in our technologically mediated and politically troubled world, I encountered Iris Murdoch’s concept of attention—which offered a compelling way forward toward more ethical action. My fascination with Murdochian attention quickly deepened, becoming foundational to my own philosophical orientation and ultimately guiding me toward the NRCR Certificate and my work with the BWG. The ideas I encountered in *Ethics and Attention* proved central to both the BWG’s collaborative practices and my role in helping develop their charter. And so, I’ll begin with attention.

The seminar opened with William James’ foundational definition of attention: “Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence” (James 1890, 403). Whether we pay attention intentionally or accidentally, it involves directing our focus toward an *object of attention* (Debus 2013). Objects of attention can be anything we attend to, be they internal or external, concrete objects or abstract concepts, the physical world and the individuals which surround us or the media we consume. While we believe that some of the objects we attend to are important or worthwhile, we consider others insignificant. Yet, as James Williams (2018) asserts, “in order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter” (xi). When we attend to objects that don’t matter, we ignore the things that do. So not only do we pay attention, we pay *with* our attention.

Living in an Attention Economy

I came to understand attention's importance as we examined the forces that seize, fragment, and compete for it. As Timothy Wu (2016) describes in *The Attention Merchants*, we now operate in an *attention economy*. Under this economy, the attention industry exploits our attention as a commodity by buying, selling, and capturing it with, and more often without, our consent. While we may initially choose to read the news, watch streamed television, or scroll through social media, these activities inundate us with advertising and are deliberately designed to capture our attention—and keep us coming back for more.

Attention merchants employ sensational and somatic stimuli (e.g., moving images, flashing lights, intriguing or startling sounds) in an attempt to enthrall as many people as possible and thereby profit as much as possible. Since these stimuli bypass our intentional attention to repeatedly trigger our more primal responses, they are impossible for us to truly ignore. Our finite self-control is no match for the constant onslaught of stimuli and abundance of information that confronts us. Profuse, inescapable input overwhelms our self-control and forces us into a mental overload. Attempting to ignore (rather than attend to) the stimuli further depletes our self-control until we eventually “lose control over [our] attentional processes” (15). We hyper-focus on whatever the attention merchants proscribe for us and become “indifferent” to the rest (23).

This familiar state is what Williams (2018) calls *attention scarcity*: it's not that we no longer pay attention, but instead that we lack the ability to self-regulate our attention. Attention scarcity extends to every part of our lives, as depleted self-control in one context inhibits our ability to exercise self-control in others. This is particularly consequential since the attention industry has colonized every physical and social space. Now that we habitually keep, and are often expected to keep, pocket-sized computers within reach at all times, avoiding interaction

with the industry's technology and media is nearly impossible. Everywhere we go, the lack of "existing boundaries in [our] environment... requires [us] to bring [our] *own* boundaries where [we] didn't have to before" (22). But doing so requires self-control, the very thing that the attention industry is designing out of us. Instead of setting boundaries, we normalize the constant appropriation of our attention. As a result, explains Williams, not only our actions but also our individual and collective consciousness shifts per the attention industry's design. In a state of attention scarcity, unable to set boundaries for ourselves, we lose control over our lives.

Regaining control over our attentional processes results in more than regained autonomy—it can enable us to *better understand reality* and thereby *respond to the world more ethically*. Studying philosopher Iris Murdoch's concept of attention provided some insights into what the attention industry is both activating in us (self-protective ego and fantasy) and undermining (our ability to direct attention and capacity for reflection).

Iris Murdoch's Moral Concept of Attention

My grasp of Murdoch's concept of attention was shaped by course readings from various philosophers, including Silvia Panizza and Margaret Holland, who interpreted and applied her account. Rather than treating our *moral lives* as limited to discrete moments of decision or action, Murdoch (1971) contends that our *ongoing perceptual engagement* with the world—how we attend throughout the whole of our lives—is central to moral life. Our attention shapes the quality of our perception which, in turn, guides our reflective processes, our understanding of the object of attention (often a person or situation), and our subsequent actions. As we move through the world, we are compelled to act in accordance with what we see such that "by the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act" (OGG 65). Because our perception can be better or worse, more or less grounded in reality,

so too can our actions. When we pay proper attention and see objects clearly, as they really are, we act in response to the *reality* that we perceive (IP 39). This is why Murdoch contends that a moral practice of attention can enable us to act more ethically.

Learning about Murdoch's account further revealed the cost of our diminished autonomy under the attention economy. For Murdoch, true freedom resides in our ability to direct our attention toward reality and respond accordingly—a freedom that is becoming increasingly difficult for us to realize. When the attention industry steals our attention, it “undermine[s] fundamental capacities such as reflection and self-regulation” (Williams 2018, xi-xii). Without these capacities, our ability to direct our attention, see clearly, and thereby act in accordance with reality is greatly diminished. The infinite possibilities available to us under the attention economy offer an *illusion* of freedom—the mere absence of externally imposed constraints. But this comes at the cost of our true freedom. Without the ability to control our attention, we can neither be free in our actions nor responsive to reality.

Understood in Murdochian terms, the attention economy impedes our ability to see clearly by activating our egos' self-protective tendencies and fostering *fantasy*, a creation of the ego which serves as the greatest barrier between ourselves and reality. Murdoch scholar Silvia Panizza describes the self-concerned *ego* as “naturally untruthful,” inclined to direct attention inwards and protect itself by inventing untrue yet “consoling fantasies about itself and the world” (2022-b, 42). We see this in the stories we habitually tell ourselves when we let assumptions persist, judge too quickly, or react with defensiveness rather than curiosity. These egocentric fantasies can take on a life of their own, “proliferat[ing]... self-centered aims and images” that inflate the self's importance within our field of vision (OGG 65). Centering ourselves and our point of view distorts our perception of ourselves and, by extension, our perception of the

external world. For example, rather than recognizing someone's harsh tone as shaped by the complexities of their experience, our ego takes it as proof of their feelings toward us and their supposed shortcomings. This imagined certainty can turn into a story about the intelligence and character of anyone who reminds us of them. We go around misconstruing situations because, imagining we already know the truth and have no need to discover anything more, we fail to attend to the world around us (Panizza 2022-a).¹⁴ We can become blind to reality, believing instead that our perception—a fantasy—is reality; and then acting accordingly.

Murdochian attention is a practice of disciplined perceptual engagement with the world that can help us overcome fantasy by bringing our perception into closer alignment with reality. Murdochian attention overcomes fantasy through a practice of *unselfing* that tames, suppresses, or removes the ego and its tendency towards excessive self-concern (Panizza 2022-a). When a person is unselfed during the act of attention, their ego has no control over their perceptions and therefore no ability to distort them. By developing an awareness of one's own pre-dispositions and biases, and "training the [ego] not to interfere" with one's perceptions, we can reorient ourselves away from egocentric fantasy (Holland 1998, 309).¹⁵ Although we only have "some continual slight control over the direction and focus of [our] vision," we can still shift our mental state so we are less likely to take on serious misconceptions (IP 39). Murdochian attention

¹⁴ While we are morally responsible for our fantasies, and the actions they compel us to take, we are often not conscious of them. This is exemplified by Murdoch scholar Silvia Panizza's (2022-b) discussion of a photo in which a crying woman watches an animal as it's led to slaughter while the men leading the animal laugh at her. Panizza describes the men's attitude as *ironic detachment*, a "gaze of detachment and avoidance" (42). Rather than attending and responding to the reality of the animal's (or the woman's) experience, they don't even look at the animal. Panizza theorizes that this stems from their egos' attempts to protect them from feelings of guilt or vulnerability and "prevent... disruption of [their] worldview" (42). Maintaining an attitude of ironic detachment safeguards their commitment to eating meat by keeping more options open, including eating the animal. Attending to the animal (as the woman does) would require sacrifice on the part of their egos: an openness to being wrong, to abandoning fantasy, and to changing not only their attitudes but potentially their beliefs and actions.

¹⁵ Panizza (2022-a) raises the concern that attempts to scrutinize and suppress egocentric self-concern may simply intensify self-focus. Following Murdoch, she suggests that orienting oneself toward external reality and its value, even amid inner work, offers a way to counter this risk.

therefore involves not only the unselfed act of seeing but also a subsequent reflective return to one's self in which one integrates new perceptions with previously-held concepts and beliefs. These processes—unselfing and reflective integration—may occur separately or simultaneously, such as when the work of attention unfolds entirely within one's inner world.

I began to truly grasp Murdochian attention after reading Margaret Holland's (1998) discussion of Murdoch's famous M and D example. In the example, a mother-in-law (M) initially views her daughter-in-law (D) as good-hearted yet childish, unrefined, obnoxious, and altogether beneath her son (IP 16-17). As "an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism," M takes time—in D's absence—to examine her biases and reconsider D with clearer eyes (IP 17). Through sustained, deliberate, and imaginative reflection, M gradually perceives qualities her prejudice had obscured. She comes to see D not as childish and unrefined but as delightfully youthful and refreshingly simple, not obnoxious but lively and spontaneous. With M, Murdoch illustrates the kind of reflective and imaginative attention she advocates—attention that enhances our ability to engage with reality, more clearly discern value, and arrive at a more just, loving, and realistic vision of the object of our attention (Holland 1998; Panizza 2022-a).

Murdoch's example also illustrates how M's clear vision of D arises only through a practice of *just* and *loving* attention. Justice incorporates "the notion of seeing fairly": attending to the object and to its context—its background, embeddedness, and connections—to achieve a richer and more comprehensive understanding (Holland 1998, 309). Love adds notions of patience, humility, and generosity: "allow[ing] time for the object to show itself," acknowledging that full reality is unknowable, and "granting the benefit of the doubt" as one attends to the object (Holland 1998, 309). When the object is another person, this might look like M's use of empathetic imagination to grasp—through attunement rather than extrapolation—what D's

experience might be like (Panizza 2022-b). Murdoch emphasizes love as the ultimate attentive force, describing it as “an exercise of the imagination” that enables “the discovery of reality” (SG 215-16). Through this combination of justice and love, Murdochian attention helps us perceive, join, and accept the world as it truly is, despite the limits of our understanding.

As Murdoch describes it, just and loving attention is the kind of attention that, by enabling clear vision, I believe could facilitate a shift toward more ethically responsive action. But considering Murdochian attention within our current context of attention scarcity led me to recognize how incredibly difficult it is to put into practice. Because what we attend to, and how we attend, shapes our views and guides our moral reasoning, any decline in the quality of our attention has profound moral consequences. The attention economy produces such a decline by encouraging distraction, cultivating egocentric fantasy, and undermining the very capacities Murdoch sees as foundational to moral life: self-control, reflection, justice, and love. A practice of Murdochian attention can help us better perceive reality and cultivate our moral imagination, enabling us to re-envision our relationships with others and our environment. Failures of attention, conversely, deepen detachment from people, context, and reality itself, reinforcing some of the fantasies Murdochian attention endeavors to overcome. Reading Elizabeth Anderson’s *Can We Talk?: Communicating Moral Concern in an Era of Polarized Politics* offered some insight into actionable techniques for cultivating attentive capacities.

The Socio-Political Role of Attention

Elizabeth Anderson (2022) argues that many of our current political troubles are the result of paying attention to the wrong things. She says this arises because in political discourse, people routinely conflate *first-order moral claims* about specific policies and actions with *second-order moral claims* about people’s identity and character. Perceiving statements about political actions

as “illegitimate” personal attacks activates strong emotions of fear and resentment, which often manifest as “identity-protective aggression” (76). People become outraged over the imagined second-order insult, ignore the first-order issue, and dismiss the speaker as “hypocritical, smug, and disingenuous” (70). Similar attacks between political groups heighten moral pride for one’s own group and contempt for the outgroup. These experiences fuel *affective polarization*, in which political groups “dislike, distrust, and hold negative stereotypes about each other” (68). Political discourse becomes a competition for moral superiority. Attempting to win and distrusting their competition, people “insulat[e] themselves from accountability to others who they regard as inferior” (73). To counter these anti-cooperative attitudes, Anderson argues, we must make politics less personal.

When Anderson advocates for de-personalizing politics, she doesn’t mean we should become detached or avoid personal engagement; instead, she urges us to disentangle second-order concerns from first-order claims. Doing so enables us to keep political discourse focused on first-order concerns about how to best solve our current problems rather than devolving into arguments about who is the morally better person. Anderson explains that distinguishing first-order conversations from second-order threats depends on separating our identities from our immediate experiences. Achieving this, she argues, requires cultivating *ideological mercy* and *epistemic humility*. Ideological mercy involves charitably understanding others’ opinions within their personal contexts, recognizing that “from their point of view, their beliefs make sense and are what any decent person would affirm” (84). Epistemic humility, in turn, involves recognizing that “one’s own point of view [is] only partial, contingent, and subject to revision,” and thus *we* may be ignorant or misunderstanding of the issue (86). By grounding our communication in the issues themselves, we can remain open to revising our perception and avoid competing for moral

superiority. Yet to make this shift possible, we also must disarm the fear and resentment underlying distrust,¹⁶ a task for which Anderson offers several practical techniques.

To help people overcome their fear and resentment and respond less aggressively, Anderson offers guidance for engaging them in “nondirective, nonjudgemental conversations” (80). She emphasizes activating their sympathy through “sincere, heartfelt communication that conveys good will and common interests” and “expressing respect for... [their] autonomy” through attentive listening (76; 80). Building on this foundation, one can share aspects of the resented group’s experience and invite them to practice *analogic perspective-taking*—reflecting on others’ experiences by considering how it would feel to be in their position. In these moments, she encourages guiding them to notice commonalities, respond sympathetically, and even feel “indignation on behalf of others similarly judged—a feeling that might also support their own sense of themselves as good people who aren’t bigots” (80). As their understanding, sympathy, and identification with those they fear or resent increase, they can become better able to explore their own inconsistencies, reassess the perceived danger, and discuss a first-order moral concern without experiencing it as a second-order threat.

Although Anderson does not reference Murdoch, reading about their work side by side highlighted how their views overlap in some noteworthy ways. Anderson’s concept of epistemic humility mirrors the attitude necessary for Murdochian unselfing: an openness to apprehending reality “regardless of the effects on us and the thoughts and worldview we think of as ‘ours’” (Panizza 2022-a, 104). Anderson’s concept of ideological mercy, with its emphasis on understanding context and giving others the benefit of the doubt, similarly echoes the just and

¹⁶ Foundational to Anderson’s (2022) argument is her claim that democracy depends on citizens maintaining a baseline of trust in one another. Distrust, by contrast, “undermines our ability to construct a shared reality or common ground on which to move forward to address the problems we face together” (74). Combatting distrust and cultivating mutual understanding are inseparable tasks.

loving aspects of Murdochian attention. As was noted in class, Murdoch even seems to imply that a just and loving gaze is essential for liberal democracy—for without it, people fall prey to distorted perceptions, vicious stereotypes, and warped kinds of thinking about others. Anderson's techniques for activating sympathy and engaging in analogic perspective-taking can be read as concrete methods for cultivating this kind of moral attention in both oneself and others. Both thinkers likewise align with research on reducing unconscious bias: Hoffman and Winter (2022) found that the most effective interventions involve learning to temper one's judgements of both oneself and others by gaining greater informational awareness and engaging in deliberate practices of attention.¹⁷ Reading these works together throughout the course gave me a theoretical and practical foundation for seeing how the quality of our attention shapes our actions and for cultivating the kinds of attentive practices that can lead us toward more ethical action.

The Montana Beaver Working Group's Practices of Attention

Anderson's (2022) portrayal of ideal democratic communication about solutions to problems—as “a call to attention” rather than a call to “specific, predefined actions”—is directly applicable to how the BWG functions (85-86). The group brings together people from various agencies, disciplines, and worldviews to discuss controversial topics, learn together, and coordinate their individual actions toward a collective goal. The BWG's work—from meetings to resource sharing—creates the conditions for members to engage one another in open, reciprocal, and attentive ways. Their focus on shared socio-ecological realities (e.g., beaver behavior, watershed needs, landowner concerns, and regulatory frameworks) as opposed to moral or

¹⁷ Through a meta-analysis of research on unconscious bias, Hoffman and Winter (2022) identified seven overlapping interventions: raising awareness of bias and its effects; increasing motivation to counteract it; encouraging individuation—“enabling people to see others more three-dimensionally” rather than “defined solely by an identity” (18); fostering perspective-taking and empathy; increasing contact with outgroup members, either directly or indirectly (e.g., imagined, vicarious, or media-based contact); negating or replacing stereotypes; and practicing mindfulness.

controversial debates (e.g., stances on trapping) keeps their discussions to first-order questions without provoking second-order conflicts. While members shape the group's organization and collective actions, I believe it is their attention that provides the foundation for the BWG's collaborative capacity.

BWG members' ability to collaborate across perspectives and create a common vision illustrates Murdoch's claim that the quality of our actions depends on the quality of our attention. Their collaboration rests on practices of attending to one another, seeing fairly, extending the benefit of the doubt, and acknowledging each other's specific contexts. Their humility about the limits of their own perspectives opens them to revising their views, for without such humility they would have no reason to come together, build shared understanding, and move forward as a collective. In these ways, BWG members enact high-quality attentional practices that mirror those described by Murdoch and Anderson. The group's successful actions reflect their shared commitment to seeing one another accurately as real, three-dimensional people rather than as mere representatives of their organizations or positions.

Murdoch's warnings about the dangers of egocentric fantasy are also important to consider when convening a collaborative group. When participating in BWG meetings, members must be able to bracket their organizational priorities, assumptions, and sometimes their habitual framings in order to understand others' positions, values, and constraints. Because of this, the BWG's expectations of members align with those of Murdochian unselfing. Members are expected to be able to attend to one another and the issues at hand without their egos becoming inflamed. The only people who cannot participate in the group are those who demonstrate an inability to remain inclusive and respectful of everyone else—that is, are unable to separate first- and second-order concerns or keep their egos from clouding their perception. Their exclusion is

not a result of the BWG's unwillingness to include them; instead, it is a result of their own unwillingness (or inability) to see—and join—the group on its own terms, as it really is. The BWG's efforts to maintain openness, humility, and clear vision enable them to actively engage with one another on first-order issues and collaborate effectively towards their common goals.

The Montana Beaver Working Group Charter as a Product and Object of Attention

Murdoch's concept of attention was at the root of my motivation to do this project and at the core of how I went about it. Murdoch explains that “as moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination [fantasy], to direct reflection” (IP 39). Taking Murdoch's guidance to heart impacted how I showed up and attended throughout the project. From the outset, I was committed to endeavoring to justly and lovingly see—and thereby understand—the BWG, its members, and their work. This meant cultivating curiosity instead of relying on assumptions, being patient, and remaining open to what people, ideas, and situations revealed over time. I listened closely, asked clarifying questions, noticed conceptual mismatches, and worked to understand each person's perspective from their own point of view. I also tried to avoid the distortions of egocentric fantasy: I neither romanticized the BWG's work nor shied away from the tensions—philosophical, personal, or practical—that surfaced during the process. At the same time, I practiced imaginative reflection to consider the BWG from its members' perspectives. I worked to continuously attend throughout—to notice how my past experiences, present commitments, and personal tendencies shaped my perceptions, and to reflectively hold myself to the task of seeing the group as justly and lovingly as I could.

In order to gain, to the greatest possible extent, a clear vision of the BWG and the members I worked with, I also followed attempted to exert some control over my vision by

implementing a Murdochian practice of unselfing. I oriented myself toward the group's collective reality and members' individual realities by attending to their collective history, constraints, and aspirations as well as their individual perspectives. I tried to avoid projecting my fantasies of what a collaborative "should" be or how the BWG "should" operate. I tried to separate my ego—my personal desires, preconceptions, and sometimes my philosophical training—from the truth of what BWG members were actually expressing. I practiced this separation, for example, when providing BWG members with suggestions regarding the charter and when revising the document. Avoiding ego's interference, however imperfectly, helped me successfully perform a supporting and synthesizing, rather than conceptually generative, role.

My practice of Murdochian attention, and the combination of unselfing and reflective integration that it entails, bridged all aspects of my project work—observation, facilitation and writing. Observing and note-taking during BWG meetings gave me the opportunity to both practice this unselfing and attend to the BWG's collaborative practices (e.g., how members navigated collaborative conversations, built shared understanding, and reconciled differences in understanding, perspective, and priorities). When facilitating and participating in these meetings, I actively engaged in a reflective practice of Murdochian attention as I connected my perceptions with my active, engaged understanding. Taking a note from Anderson, I also used my perspective and knowledge base as a philosophy student enabled me to offer comments and ask questions which engaged members in advancing their own attentive and reflective skills. My attentive practices brought me to a clearer vision of the BWG's reality and, further, guided me in distilling members' ideas and perspectives into a cohesive charter document which they could all agree on.

The reflective integration aspect of Murdochian attention was integral when developing the charter. I first had to attend to linguistic and conceptual nuance, discern members' underlying

values and priorities (e.g., when developing guiding principles), and identify points of convergence and divergence. Translating all of my acquired understanding into a coherent, accessible document required an intentional practice of reflection. I had to discover language capable of encompassing the BWG's needs by remaining both specific enough to functionally provide structure and flexible enough to allow for different perspectives and future changes. In the end, I agree with Murdoch: the quality of my attention was a determining factor (among others, such as my writing skills) in the clarity and accuracy of the charter.

My project deliverable, the BWG Charter, is both a product and object of attention. It is a product of my personal practice of moral attention, a record of the BWG's collective attention (which I attended to in developing the document), and an object of attention for BWG members that provides a guide for the group's future attentional practices. By helping people better understand the reality of the group and one another (including their identity, structure, functions, commitments, values, and future), the charter enables members to deepen their practices of attention as they interact with one another. When perceived in these ways, the charter can be understood as more than a mere administrative document which supports the BWG's organizational and collaborative capacity. In reality, the charter is a *moral artifact*, shaped by our collective practices of attention, practices which attempt to *resist egocentric fantasy, cultivate humility, and develop a collective vision for collaborative action*.

4. ACTIONS TAKEN

From mid-October 2025 to mid-June 2026, I designed and managed a multifaceted collaborative process to develop the BWG’s first formal charter. The following actions represent the core components of the work I undertook:

Action	Description
<i>1. Conducted background research, designed a charter development process, and created a BWG Charter Proposal.</i> (October – December)	To initiate the BWG’s charter development process, I conducted substantial background research, reviewing charters from comparable groups, compiling information from past BWG meetings, and synthesizing the issues and interests shaping the group’s needs. Using this analysis to understand <i>how</i> the charter should be developed, I created a Charter Proposal that outlined my process recommendations and identified key questions and potential charter components for the group to consider.
<i>2. Supported the BWG’s Action Planning process and identified charter-related content as part of my NRCR Practicum project.</i> (October – June)	To support the BWG’s Action Planning process, I participated in and documented numerous meetings with the UM facilitation team (bi-weekly), BWG Action Planning team (bi-weekly), BWG Leadership Team (monthly), and larger working group (bi-annually). I produced meeting summaries, draft goals, and a report synthesizing survey feedback from members. Many of the conversations that unfolded in Action Planning spaces—about the group’s mission, purpose, structure, collaborative role, and long-term goals—necessarily informed charter development. I tracked ideas across both processes, clarified differences and linkages between the documents, and identified, captured, and integrated relevant ideas into the charter.
<i>3. Coordinated and facilitated eight Charter Team meetings to support iterative charter development and drafting.</i> (October – May)	I collaborated with the Charter Team—BWG Coordinator Shelby Weigand, and FWP Nongame Wildlife Biologist and BWG Leadership Team member Torrey Ritter—throughout the charter development process. I initiated and scheduled meetings as needed (approximately monthly) to address procedural and substantive questions and review successive charter drafts. I facilitated discussions covering core questions about the charter’s purpose, intended benefits, potential consequences, and degree of formalization; broader considerations related to the group’s vision, organizational identity, membership, and conception of inclusion; and specific issues regarding the charter’s content and structure.

Action	Description
<i>4. Drafted and iteratively revised seven full charter drafts based on feedback from BWG members.</i> (January – June)	I drafted and revised seven complete versions of the BWG charter through an iterative revision process that incorporated extensive feedback from the Charter Team, Leadership Team, and larger membership. I incorporated extensive feedback—including draft language, copious comments, and in-line edits on every draft—into iterative revisions of the charter. Across drafts, I collaboratively developed and refined content, resolved questions about substance and structure, clarified language, and synthesized verbal and written feedback. My work transformed BWG members’ evolving ideas into a coherent, comprehensive, and streamlined charter.
<i>5. Facilitated two Leadership Team meetings to collaboratively guide the charter’s foundations, development, and refinement.</i> (January & March)	I designed and facilitated two charter-focused conversations with the Leadership Team during their regular meetings. In January, I led a Guiding Principles Workshop that created group agreement around the charter’s purpose and facilitated the collaborative development of Guiding Principles. In March, I made space for high-level charter feedback and helped them determine decision-making procedures for navigating potential future conflict or controversy. Across both meetings, I prepared agendas, wrote meeting summaries, and incorporated the group’s input into subsequent charter drafts to ensure the document reflected their priorities and perspectives.
<i>6. Presented on the charter project at the BWG’s two annual all-member meetings.</i> (December & April)	I delivered two charter presentations to the larger BWG membership to keep them informed and engaged. At the December Virtual Meeting, I presented an initial overview of the charter development process and timeline to roughly seventy members. In April, I traveled to Lewistown, MT to support the group’s two-day Annual Spring Meeting by assisting with setup, takedown, and other logistics. On the first day, I facilitated breakout discussions around an Action Plan goal. On the second day, I presented the sixth charter draft to the roughly thirty members in attendance, providing printed copies for their review and explaining both the charter’s overall purpose and the purpose of each component. Members then asked questions and offered comments that informed subsequent revisions.
<i>7. Solicited input from the full BWG membership through a survey.</i> (April – June)	Following the April meeting, I developed a feedback survey that was distributed to all BWG members, giving them the opportunity to comment on the draft charter. I synthesized the resulting feedback into a summary report and, in consultation with the Charter Team, integrated the necessary revisions to produce the final draft.

Given the academic origins of my project, I maintained regular communication with both my academic advisors and project partners throughout. I also convened two check-in meetings with my full support team to build shared understanding of my CEP and Practicum projects, provide holistic progress updates, and receive feedback on my work.

I completed the final draft of the charter in mid-June 2026. Following approval from the Charter Team, it was made publicly available on the BWG's website later that month, distributed to the full BWG membership through the group's July/August 2026 newsletter, and highlighted at their December 2026 Virtual Meeting. To read the completed document, see *Appendix A: Montana Beaver Working Group Charter*.

5. ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CHALLENGES

My project was highly successful in implementing a collaborative process that culminated in the BWG's first formal charter. The final charter accomplished the group's goals by strengthening their organizational capacity and providing much-needed clarity and structure around the BWG as an entity. It synthesized members' perspectives while also laying the groundwork for more robust representation from relevant interest groups, especially trappers. Throughout the process, I received extremely positive feedback from my project partners, including Shelby Weigand, Torrey Ritter, other members of the Leadership Team, and BWG members who shared comments after my presentation at the 2026 Annual Meeting and through the survey. Two trappers who were new to the group also attended the Annual Meeting and offered encouraging feedback about the BWG's direction—something the group rarely receives from trappers. They emphasized how the charter provided them with assurance about their participation by striking the right balance between welcoming them and avoiding positional stances. In the end, the charter gave the BWG a clear, concrete document that both existing and prospective members could agree upon and trust.

The sheer volume of background information and feedback, representing a diversity of perspectives, made it challenging to produce a coherent, neutral document. Participating simultaneously in the action planning and charter development processes broadened and deepened my understanding of what the BWG was about, what they hoped to achieve, and how they intended to move forward—but also added to the amount of nuanced information I needed to synthesize. Participating in both processes also gave me a more holistic understanding of the organizational capacity factors that nourish successful collaboration—and the strategic planning work that supports them. Seeing how the processes informed one another helped me recognize

the importance of aligning organizational structure with group capacity and needs around transparency, accountability, and responsibility. Writing the initial draft required me to integrate notes from charter-focused and action planning conversations, preceding Leadership Team meetings, the informal internal evaluation, and my background research on charters. I repeated this process six more times, incorporating new information and feedback from ongoing conversations and reconciling differences in perspective.

My goal in writing the charter was to balance specificity with flexibility so I could accurately convey information without dismissing or criticizing any individual or group. Because I was writing the charter for the BWG, I needed to reflect the voices of different members and represent the collective without inserting my own bias. I worked to balance offering input or direction with giving space for BWG members to make decisions. In this way, I practiced leadership as a form of facilitation as opposed to leadership as a position of decision-making authority. In the end, I succeeded in creating a collaborative product by drawing on my own perspective to support discernment while remaining neutral and inclusive of all participating members' perspectives.

Not only was the charter itself an accomplishment, but so too was my development and facilitation of the collaborative process that produced it. Beginning with my Charter Proposal, I emphasized the importance of process. Charter development moved through four phases: information gathering (e.g., background research, internal evaluation), charter component selection, drafting, and feedback and revision. Throughout these phases, I sought and implemented constructive feedback on both my writing and my facilitation. This iterative approach enabled me to improve as the process moved forward and practice adaptive management—adjusting steps and timelines as necessary to ensure that both my contributions

and the charter itself met the BWG's needs. Because I entered the project with a general idea of the process while fully expecting it to evolve, I found it easier to adapt than I had anticipated.

Over the course of my project, I gained practical experience navigating collaborative conversations and reconciling differences across perspectives, while also recognizing that this is a skill I will continue to develop. Since my responsibilities differed significantly across the charter development and action planning processes, I sometimes found it challenging to navigate the shifts between roles and their professional and academic dimensions. With Alexis and Heather, I worked to balance my professional role as their project partner with my academic role as a student learning from their mentorship. I communicated transparently about my capacity and needs, ensuring that I committed only to work and timelines I could realistically meet and reliably follow through on. With BWG members, I learned how to adjust roles across projects—from performing a largely silent, supportive note-taking function in action planning to actively facilitating conversations and the charter's development.

One of the most challenging aspects of facilitating collaborative conversations was directing others' attention—keeping the group focused on the meeting's purpose and broader conceptual content without getting pulled into the details. Meeting virtually added further complexity, so I experimented with typing notes while sharing my screen so everyone could follow along. After facilitating the January Leadership Team meeting, I asked Alexis and Heather for feedback. They noted how I helped participants dig deeper and balanced my facilitative role with offering direction. Then they encouraged me to let conversations unfold more fully, rely on open content gathering by typing screen-shared notes on every comment (rather than prioritizing those that aligned with the workshop's pre-defined purpose) and waiting until afterward to synthesize content and identify targets. When I facilitated the March

Leadership Team meeting, I intentionally applied their feedback. Because we were all looking at the charter document, I decided against taking screen-shared notes, but I gave participants more space to follow their side conversations before guiding them back to the main topic. I noticed a marked improvement in the conversation's flow and productivity.

My experience attending the BWG Annual Meeting highlighted how integral members' interpersonal orientation and relationships are in nourishing collaboration and sustaining the group's organizational capacity. At the meeting, I witnessed (and was part of) a diverse group of people who came together in a friendly, respectful, and open manner—around a common vision to figure out how to make it a reality. This helped me recognize two things. First, philosophy has a place everywhere. Philosophy is inherent in how we move through the world—our values, curiosity, attention, critical thinking, and ways of interacting with people. It therefore plays an important role in every space we inhabit. Second, the BWG is *already* helping people pay moral attention, talk to each other, and value different perspectives through sustainable collaborative processes. Seeing the BWG bring together people from such varied fields, experiences, and political views in a genuinely positive, collaborative way renewed my hope for an attentive, ethical future shared by humans and the more-than-human world.

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APPENDIX A: MONTANA BEAVER WORKING GROUP CHARTER



MONTANA BEAVER WORKING GROUP CHARTER

Version: 6/12/26

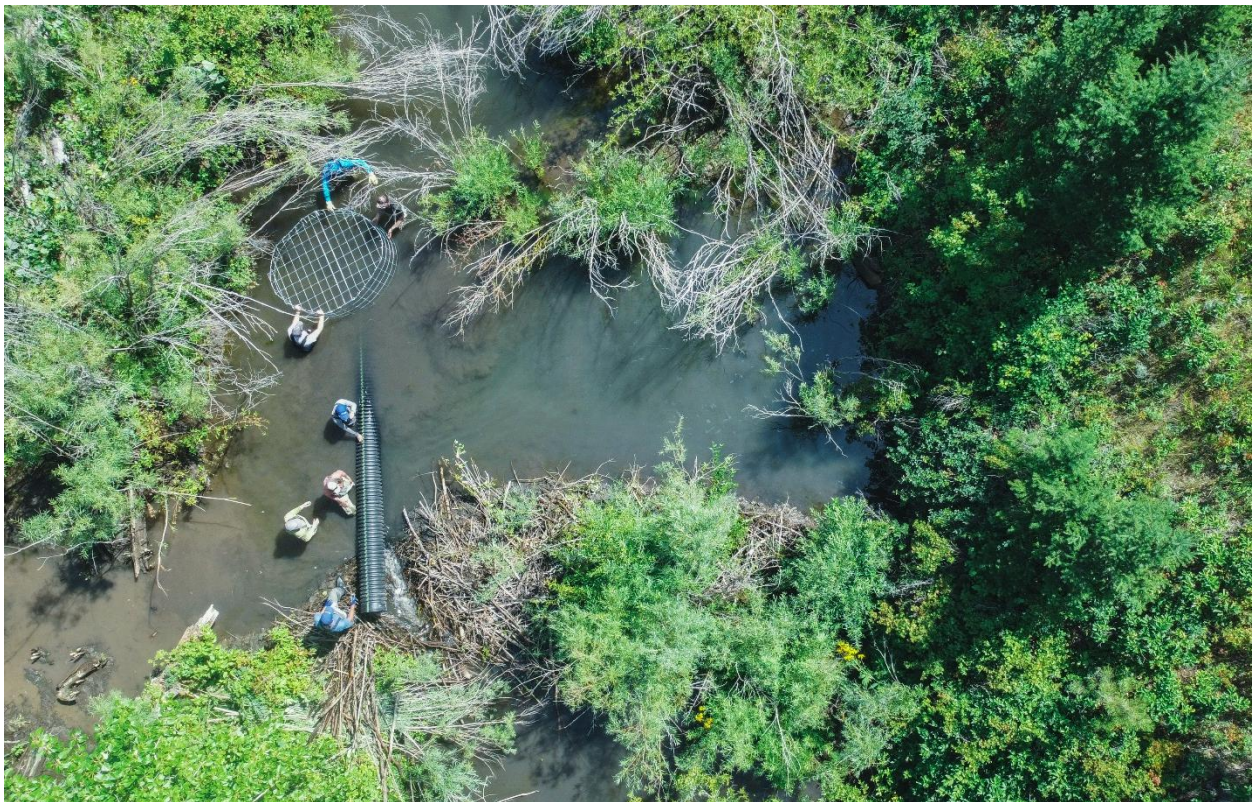


Photo Credit: Tanner Saul (NWF)

The purpose of this charter is to codify the BWG's identity and mission, outline the BWG's guiding principles, clarify the BWG's governance and operating structure, and strengthen the BWG's internal and external communications.

Charter Contents

Purpose of the Montana Beaver Working Group	3
Guiding Principles	3
Montana Beaver Action Plan	4
Membership	5
Governance and Operating Structure	5
Decision Making	6
Structure of Teams and Roles	6
Leadership Team	6
Coordination Team	6
Subcommittees	7
Amending the Charter	8
Communications	8
Funding	8

Purpose of the Montana Beaver Working Group

The Montana Beaver Working Group (BWG) is a collaborative network of individuals and organizations committed to supporting the role beavers play in Montana's watershed health. As a non-centralized organizational entity, we provide a collaborative forum for Montanans engaged in beaver-related work to communicate and coordinate their efforts focused on beaver restoration, management, policy, research, and education across the state. Our work is grounded in strong relationships, shared learning, careful consideration of nuance, and sustainable socio-ecological practices that help us support long-term ecological and community resilience.

Our mission is to *connect people and share resources to elevate the vital role of beavers in Montana's ecosystems*. We support restoring beavers to their historic range, where appropriate, and recognize the numerous benefits beavers bring to the landscape while simultaneously acknowledging potential conflicts between human interests and beaver behavior. We do not advocate for particular outcomes for particular projects, take positions on controversial topics, or get involved in moral debates, nor are we a centralized organization with a single, fixed agenda.

In support of our mission, we:

- Connect restoration practitioners, state and federal agencies, Tribes, non-profit organizations, and other interested individuals across regions and disciplines.
- Provide a platform for beaver-related information sharing, project collaboration, and the joint creation of statewide resources.
- Create conditions for members to more effectively implement their work.

Members' on-the-ground projects include addressing beaver conflicts, providing resources to manage beavers on the landscape, implementing beaver restoration and ecosystem recovery, and working on policies and research that can benefit beaver restoration and management. Connecting through the BWG enables members to maintain a holistic perspective on beaver-related work in Montana, recognize differences and similarities across regions, develop consistent language and protocols, and encourage management practices which are carefully considered and sustainable.

As a connector and convener, we engage our members by:

- Circulating our bi-monthly newsletter which focuses on relevant beaver-related content, sharing stories, events, resources, and opportunities both in Montana and nationally.
- Coordinating the drafting and implementation of the Montana Beaver Action Plan (Action Plan).
- Hosting two annual meetings open to all our members: a Winter virtual meeting and a Spring in-person meeting. These meetings provide a forum for members to receive updates on working group actions, share information, make collaborative decisions, and update and execute the Action Plan.

Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles motivate and direct the BWG's approach to working together and implementing projects:

- *Commitment to Science:* We ground our decisions and practices in the best available science, relying on evidence-based information to guide our work.
- *Recognition of Ecosystem Values:* We value healthy ecosystems and the socio-ecological benefits they provide. While we explicitly recognize the contributions of beavers to ecosystem function, watershed resilience, and climate adaptation, we ground our decisions in a holistic understanding of ecosystem health rather than a single-species focus.
- *Collaboration:* We recognize that working across diverse backgrounds, agendas, and approaches can be challenging, yet remain committed to learning from one another and openly sharing our perspectives. As a group, we come together to engage in difficult conversations and support one another's efforts. Acknowledging that participants may hold conflicting views, we ensure all voices are heard and considered in group decisions.
- *Inclusivity:* We are committed to creating an inclusive space where everyone—with their diverse experiences, perspectives, and worldviews—is welcome. We actively invite participation from all individuals, groups, and Montana communities with an interest in beaver-related work to meaningfully contribute to BWG discussions, decisions, and actions so long as their behavior and participation remains in accordance with our other guiding principles.
- *Respect:* We are committed to engaging with all individuals in an open and respectful manner regardless of differences in perspective and worldview. We foster a culture where people communicate honestly and listen deeply, treating one another with professionalism and care. We show this same respect to the communities, partners, and landscapes that we work with.
- *Tribal Sovereignty:* We acknowledge Tribal Sovereignty and commit to recognizing how our actions may affect Tribal communities. We follow free, prior, and informed consent ([FPIC](#)) best practices to ensure Tribes are informed and their consent freely given before decisions move forward. We follow ownership, control, access, and possession ([OCAP](#)) principles to guide our use and distribution of Tribal information.

Montana Beaver Action Plan

As the BWG's foundational document, the Action Plan reflects our members' current projects and guides future work, providing collective, applied direction for advancing beaver-related work in Montana.

Components: Each version of the Action Plan outlines our overarching goals, strategies to achieve those goals, and the specific actions our members will undertake towards attaining those goals.

- *Goals* are broad statements which provide our work direction by reflecting our long-term objectives.
- *Strategies* specify the approaches we have decided to pursue to achieve our goals.
- *Actions* describe the work our members and partners will seek to complete during the three-year term of the Action Plan to implement our Strategies.

Revision Process: We update the Action Plan every three years through a collaborative and facilitated process which elicits input from all our members.

Membership

Becoming a BWG member offers the opportunity to participate in our collaborative forum, learn from other members, and have an impact on the direction of beaver-related work in Montana. Membership in the BWG is free and voluntary. We welcome all interested individuals to participate so long as they remain committed to our guiding principles.

Member Benefits

BWG Members can:

- Participate in BWG meetings and activities.
- Get direct access to the Montana BWG Newsletter, with communications about upcoming events, new research, and stories from beaver-related work in Montana and beyond.
- Have a voice in the direction and organization of the BWG:
 - Provide input on the 3-year Action Plan.
 - Share and provide content to the newsletter.
 - Provide content and direction for BWG annual meeting topics and presentations.
- Become part of the BWG's larger network, which includes people at both a local and national scale who are interested and engaged in beaver restoration and management, providing support and sharing information across disciplines, regions, and skillsets.

Member Responsibilities

BWG Members are expected to:

- Demonstrate our guiding principles in meetings, group discussions, and actions associated with the BWG and when representing the BWG to other partners and the public.
- Share their experiences, data, and information around beaver restoration and management that could benefit other BWG members.
- Engage in meetings and actions (if volunteered for) to further our mission and goals.
- While there are no membership fees to participate in the BWG, voluntary contributions of time, money, and energy from members are welcome and help support shared activities.

Governance and Operating Structure

The purpose of this section is to formalize the BWG's current structure and processes used to define leadership roles, make decisions, and standardize our communications. This description is neither wholly comprehensive nor static as our leadership, structure, and functioning remain flexible and will inevitably evolve over time.

Decision Making

Recognizing the challenge of reaching consensus among our diverse members and their potentially conflicting views, the BWG strives to make decisions that reflect a science-driven, majority perspective. After considering all relevant voices, participant needs, and member feedback processes, the Leadership Team retains final decision-making authority. Although decisions may not reflect the views of every individual member, we remain committed to collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution.

Structure of Teams and Roles

Leadership Team

The Leadership Team provides strategic guidance and collective leadership to the BWG by steering Action Plan development, facilitating member engagement, planning meetings, representing the group in external forums, and navigating sensitive decisions that shape our direction and evolution.

Members: Leadership Team members are volunteers who are deeply invested in the BWG's body of work. The Leadership Team includes the Coordination Team, Subcommittee Co-Chairs, and other members who typically participate most in BWG meetings. We strive for a balance between representatives of private and public organizations and interests. The Leadership Team is chaired by a member of the Coordination Team.

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Guide high-level Action Plan and Charter development and drafting.
- Plan and execute all-BWG annual meetings (i.e., Winter virtual and Spring in-person).
- Seek volunteers and assign roles to members interested in serving on subcommittees.
- Make decisions around controversial or sensitive issues, including when input from the entire BWG or specific members may be needed on such topics.
- Evaluate organizational structure, as needed.
- Reflect the BWG's shared values when making decisions and representing the BWG.
- Support the Coordination Team with BWG administrative functions, including advising Charter amendments and addressing funding gaps.
- Chair's responsibilities:
 - Act as a primary point of contact for questions and inquiries regarding the BWG and the BWG Leadership Team.
 - Maintain regular communication and coordination among Leadership Team members to support effective group functioning.

Coordination Team

The Coordination Team manages the BWG's operations, internal communications, and outreach efforts. The BWG is currently coordinated by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF). This coordination structure can be re-evaluated by the Leadership Team as needed.

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Organize and participate in meetings (all-member, Leadership Team, and others as needed), including scheduling times, coordinating logistics, and drafting agendas.
- Handle internal communications, including publishing the newsletter and managing the BWG listserv, which includes BWG members and people interested in the BWG's work.
- Manage funding, including sponsorships, meeting expenses/budgets, and contractual costs associated with newsletter and meeting logistics, facilitation, and development.
- Provide updates to the Leadership Team about current available funding and elicit direct asks to the BWG to fill funding gaps as needed.
- Make outreach decisions and represent the BWG during external events and processes when a few members are needed.
- Share resources with Leadership Team and larger BWG and facilitate dialogue between similar state and national efforts.
- Review and amend the Charter in accordance with guidance from the Leadership Team.

Subcommittees

Subcommittees focus on executing specific Goals, Actions, or other activities. They are formed and revised annually ahead of all-BWG meetings to meet needs related to the revision and implementation of individual Action Plan components.

Members: Subcommittees are comprised of member volunteers with an interest in the subcommittee's focus. Each subcommittee is chaired by two member volunteers with relevant expertise and a willingness to take on the responsibilities of subcommittee leadership.

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Actively reach out to BWG members to garner participation, answer questions, engage in discussions, and build agreement around the subcommittee's focus.
- Support Action Plan revision efforts:
 - Provide the BWG Leadership Team with guidance in the development and revision of specific strategies and actions related to their focus.
 - Assist with member feedback processes by leading breakout groups, compiling notes, and reporting out to the larger BWG.
- Co-Chairs' responsibilities:
 - Create timelines, track subcommittee progress, and ensure that activities are accomplished.
 - Determine meeting frequency and dates in consultation with the Leadership Team and subcommittee members.
 - Document meeting minutes and provide consistent written notes and meeting outcomes to BWG Leadership.

Amending the Charter

This charter is a living document that will evolve to meet our group's needs as we continue to grow and develop. The charter will be reviewed and amended every five years by the Coordination Team based on guidance from the Leadership Team. The charter may be amended outside of the five-year schedule in response to any urgent changes and/or at the request of the Leadership Team.

Communications

For inquiries regarding the BWG, please reach out to Shelby Weigand, the current Leadership Team Chair and designated point of contact, at WeigandS@nwf.org.

The Coordination Team is responsible for sharing meeting announcements, summaries, and other relevant information with members via email. Important or urgent announcements are similarly shared with the larger BWG listserv. All other communications are distributed through the BWG newsletter, which is also posted on [our website](#).

To maintain consistent and accurate representation of the BWG, members are expected to abide by the following guidelines when referencing or representing the BWG in external communications or other public-facing activities (e.g., Action Plan-related work, funding proposals, media coverage, events, or with partner organizations):

- Members may serve as BWG representatives only on specific occasions when authorized by the Leadership Team and performing in an official capacity on behalf of the BWG (e.g., tabling events, newspaper articles, interviews, contribution to national beaver working groups, or responding to inquiries from other organizations).
- Members are responsible for not misrepresenting the BWG or leveraging its name, work, or Action Plan in external communications to advance personal or organizational agendas, including by suggesting that we endorse positions or goals we have not formally adopted.
- Members may reference the BWG when applying for funding opportunities only when the opportunity either applies to their direct role within the BWG or advances individual Action Plan components.

The views, opinions, and positions expressed by BWG members are solely those of the individual; they do not represent, nor do they necessarily reflect the position of the BWG, our affiliates, or any of our other members.

Funding

The BWG is primarily funded through a combination of grants, donations, and sponsorships. Our actions operate independently from all funding sources. The BWG only accepts financial support that maintains the group's sole authority over its operations and use of funds, declining support from funders who expect that the group's decisions or priorities will align with those of the funder.