What will it take to scale regenerative agriculture?

Charlottesville Symposium

June 2026

rare

Executive Summary

On June 17, 2026, Rare convened trustees, philanthropists, financial innovators, researchers, and conservation leaders at Oakencroft Farm in Charlottesville to explore a single question: **What will it take to scale regenerative agriculture?**

The day reinforced five key insights:

1 The challenge is no longer proving regenerative agriculture works.
Evidence from Colombia demonstrates measurable improvements in soil health, farmer resilience, and productivity.

2 Technology can dramatically expand access to knowledge.
Rare's Agent Tierra AI platform shows how trusted agricultural guidance can reach farmers at unprecedented scale.

3 Scaling requires more than technology.
Policy, leadership networks, partnerships, and behavioral insights remain essential to adoption.

4 New financial tools are emerging.
Impact investing, outcomes-based finance, debt-for-nature mechanisms, and parametric insurance are creating new pathways to fund resilience and conservation.

5 Trust is the critical ingredient.
Whether among farmers, governments, investors, or communities, trust emerged as the common thread connecting successful efforts to scale.

Foreword

The Challenge

Don’t let the name fool you. Smallholder farmers feed much of the world, steward vast landscapes, and hold enormous potential to help face the climate and biodiversity crises.

Done poorly, agriculture degrades soils, accelerates biodiversity loss, and leaves communities more vulnerable to drought, floods, and extreme weather.

Done well, it restores ecosystems, improves livelihoods, strengthens food security, and builds resilience to climate change.

The good news is we know many of the practices that can make agriculture regenerative — benefiting both people and nature. Rare has seen what’s possible firsthand through our work alongside thousands of farmers in Colombia.

But we also face a hard truth: proving what works is not enough. What got us to this moment will not get us where we need to go.

The question is: How do we help millions of farmers adopt these proven solutions?

That question, and others like it, brought us together at Dorothy Batten’s Oakencroft Farm.

Throughout the day, we explored four critical levers for scale — technology, partnerships, finance, and policy. Together, the conversations reinforced something Rare increasingly believes: lasting conservation depends not only on discovering effective solutions, but on building the systems that allow them to spread.

Answering these questions is central to Rare’s vision for the decade ahead. Our 2030 strategy is built around helping communities across the Global South strengthen their resilience — and laying pathways to scaling solutions. Conversations like the one at Oakencroft are an important step — but only the beginning.

The challenge before us is too large for any one organization to solve alone. But together, we can build the partnerships, systems, and momentum needed to bring regenerative agriculture to the scale this moment demands.

Will you join us?

Brett Jenks,
CEO, Rare

REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE WORKS

Agent Tierra: Scaling Regenerative Agriculture Through AI

Speakers:

Monica Varela, Vice President, Rare Colombia

Brandon Schauer, Senior Vice President, Rare Labs

> “The question is no longer whether regenerative agriculture works. It is how we can make it accessible to many more farmers.”
>
> — Monica Varela

The Breakthrough

Rare’s work in Colombia demonstrates that regenerative agriculture delivers measurable improvements in soil health, productivity, and farmer resilience. The obstacle is no longer evidence—it is access. Most smallholder farmers make complex decisions with little technical support and few opportunities to learn from experts.

During a fireside chat-style conversation, Monica introduced Maria Umaña, a Colombian cacao farmer whose experience illustrates both the promise and challenge of regenerative agriculture: the practices are proven effective, but what is the pathway to extending access to knowledge and support?

To address this, Rare worked with Salesforce to develop Agent Tierra, an AI-powered agricultural advisor delivered through WhatsApp. Built through extensive farmer co-design, Agent Tierra provides localized, regenerative agriculture guidance tailored to individual farm conditions.

Brandon emphasized that Agent Tierra should not replace extension workers but amplify their reach, helping bridge the massive gap between available technical support and farmer demand.

Three Takeaways

1. Regenerative agriculture produces measurable improvements in soil health and farm resilience.
2. Farmer isolation — not lack of interest — is often the biggest barrier to adoption.
3. AI can dramatically expand access to trusted technical support when designed with farmers, not for farmers.

PARTNERSHIPS AMPLIFY KNOWLEDGE

Building Better Data and Partnerships Across Farmer Networks

Speaker:

Dr. Catherine Nakalembe, Director, XylemLab, University of Maryland

> "While I can measure from above and talk about deforestation and fragmentation, in reality, the solution is an agent who will come and show them how to do it... It is the in between where humans are so important to the process."
>
> — Dr. Catherine Nakalembe

The Missing Link

Technology has transformed our ability to monitor farms, forests, and climate impacts, but data alone does not change outcomes. Farmers need trusted relationships, practical training, and timely support that helps them act on information.

Catherine highlighted the importance of combining advanced technology with deep local knowledge. Drawing from work with cacao farmers in Madagascar and agricultural programs across Africa, she demonstrated how satellite data, remote sensing, and AI can improve decision-making, anticipate climate impacts, and target interventions.

At the same time, she stressed that technology alone is insufficient. The greatest opportunity lies in connecting advanced tools—from satellites to AI—with local expertise, extension services, and partnerships that translate knowledge into better decisions on the ground.

Three Takeaways

1. Data is most valuable when paired with local knowledge and trusted relationships.
2. Technology succeeds when it solves real problems. Farmers often need practical expertise, training, and support as much as they need new tools.
3. Scalable conservation requires systems that connect information, people, and practical action.

SOLUTIONS FOR NATURE THAT SCALE ARE PROFITABLE

Why Impact Investing Matters

Speaker:

Howard Fischer, Co-Founder, Gratitude Railroad

> “We need trillions of dollars to solve these problems, and the only way to access those trillions is to provide returns investors are expecting.”
>
> — Howard Fischer

The Investment Case

The world’s conservation challenges cannot be solved with philanthropy alone. While philanthropic capital remains essential, it represents only a tiny fraction of the global financial system. In a spark talk, Howard argued that meaningful scale will require attracting private investment by demonstrating that environmental solutions can also generate competitive financial returns.

Impact investing is not simply about doing good. It is about building businesses that align profit with environmental outcomes, allowing far greater pools of capital to participate in solving climate and conservation challenges.

Three Takeaways

1. Philanthropy is essential but insufficient. Lasting change will require mobilizing mainstream capital markets alongside charitable funding. Conservation cannot scale through philanthropy alone.
2. Private capital must become part of the solution.
3. Successful impact investing requires demonstrating both impact and financial performance.

GOVERNMENTS AS SCALING PARTNERS

Advancing Nature Finance

Speaker:

Gregory Watson, Chief of Biodiversity and Natural Capital, Inter-American Development Bank

> "Nature is not a cost center.
> It is part of a country's economic strategy."
>
> — Gregory Watson

The System Shift

Nature should no longer be treated as a conservation expense—it should be recognized as essential economic infrastructure. Healthy ecosystems reduce financial risk, support livelihoods, strengthen national economies, and improve long-term resilience.

In his talk, Greg argued how unlocking large-scale investment will require financial systems that reward measurable environmental outcomes, trusted metrics that verify those outcomes, and public institutions that integrate nature into mainstream economic decision-making. He highlighted debt-for-nature swaps, biodiversity outcome bonds, and outcomes-based finance as mechanisms that can mobilize significant capital for conservation.

Three Takeaways

1. Biodiversity and natural capital underpin long-term economic stability.
2. Outcomes-based finance depends on credible measurement systems.
3. Finance ministries must become active participants in conservation efforts.

BLENDING FINANCE

Bringing More Types of Capital and Solutions to the Field

Speaker:

Kate Schweigart, Senior Vice President, Innovative Finance, Rare

> "Philanthropy can be the catalyst, but it cannot be the entire solution."
>
> — Kate Schweigart

The Innovative Approach

No single financial instrument will close the global nature finance gap. Scaling regenerative agriculture will require a portfolio of solutions that include outcomes-based finance, impact investing, government participation, and innovative insurance products.

Kate shared how Rare is helping pioneer financial tools that reward measurable conservation outcomes while reducing risk for vulnerable communities. She highlighted Rare's Small-Scale Fisheries Impact Bond, which ties investor returns to measurable ecological outcomes, as well as the growing potential of parametric insurance. Together, approaches like these can attract new sources of capital and make climate resilience financially viable at greater scale.

Three Takeaways

1. Outcomes-based finance can attract capital toward measurable conservation results.
2. **"Insurance is sexy"** because resilience matters. Parametric insurance can deliver rapid financial support after disasters, helping vulnerable communities recover faster and reducing climate risk.
3. Financial innovation is essential to closing the nature-finance gap.

POLICY CAN SCALE ADOPTION

Opening Policy Windows: How Leadership Networks Scale Change

Speaker:

Rocky Sanchez Tirona, Managing Director, Regional Programs, Rare

> "Good policy can ensure that the enabling conditions and incentives for adopting, sustaining, and financing good practices are in place."
>
> — Rocky Sanchez Tirona

The Policy Lever

Individual farmers can transform their own land, but lasting change depends on creating policies that make regenerative agriculture easier to adopt, sustain, and finance. Strong local leadership can remove structural barriers while creating incentives that encourage broader participation.

Drawing from Rare's Coastal 500 network, Rocky demonstrated how peer networks among mayors and local leaders can accelerate adoption of successful approaches. Networks such as Coastal 500 demonstrate that when leaders learn from one another and advocate collectively, successful local practices can evolve into regional and national policy. Similar leadership networks are now emerging around regenerative agriculture in Colombia.

Three Takeaways

1. Policy can remove structural barriers that individual actors cannot overcome.
2. Local leaders play a critical role in scaling proven solutions.
3. Networks accelerate learning, trust, and collective action.

TRUST ENABLES IT ALL

Closing Reflections

Speaker:

Brett Jenks and symposium participants

> “Trust is the word. We should probably talk more about that.”
> —Brett Jenks

The Common Thread

The closing discussion returned to the day’s central question: how can proven solutions reach meaningful scale? Participants highlighted technology, finance, policy, partnerships, and innovation as critical enablers. Yet a recurring theme emerged that connected nearly every conversation—trust.

Whether through farmer networks, local government leaders, AI tools, investor relationships, or conservation partnerships, trust was identified as the underlying currency that makes scaling possible. Rare’s comparative advantage may lie not only in developing solutions, but in building trusted systems that allow those solutions to spread.

Three Takeaways

1. Trust emerged as the common thread linking every scaling strategy discussed.
2. Rare’s future success depends on combining proven conservation approaches with new scaling mechanisms.
3. The challenge ahead is not inventing conservation — it is helping more people adopt and sustain it.

What Rare Learned

Across conversations about AI, finance, policy, partnerships, and conservation, several themes emerged:

- Proven solutions are not enough; adoption is the new frontier.
- Trust is a prerequisite for scale.
- Technology must complement — not replace — human relationships.
- Governments remain critical partners.
- New financial mechanisms are opening opportunities that did not exist a decade ago.
- Our greatest opportunity lies in connecting these elements into an integrated model for resilience.

The central challenge for the next decade is not inventing better conservation solutions. **It is building better systems for spreading them.**