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Ecotrust and the 3 Es in the Polycrisis of the 21st Century

Introduction and Context

We are in an era of crisis. Social movements for environmental protection, climate resilience, and social/racial justice are facing the most profound challenges since their origins in the aftermath of World War II: a storm of rising authoritarianism in the United States and elsewhere, an increase in wars of aggression, and growing right-wing radicalism motivated by anti-immigrant sentiment.

These crises are manifesting themselves through countless examples of destructive and retrograde policies and government actions by the Trump Administration, as well as other authoritarian regimes throughout the world. To take just three of many examples from the United States:

- In July 2025, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ceased providing regulations on the basis of greenhouse gas emissions by repealing the 2009 greenhouse gas endangerment finding (NRDC 2026), taking away the single biggest regulatory tool the U.S. government could use to address climate change.
- In February 2026, the U.S. and Israeli militaries attacked Iran (New York Times 2026), killing over 7,000 people and injuring tens of thousands across 14 counties as of June 2026 (Al Jazeera 2026).
- In March 2026, President of the United States Donald J. Trump issued Executive Order 14398, which prohibits all U.S. government contractors and subcontractors from engaging in “racially discriminatory” Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) activities, delivering a huge blow to programs, policies, investments, and all other interventions to promote racial, gender, and all forms of social justice.

At the same time as vulnerable communities and the movements representing them have been assaulted by the current federal administration, the planetary systems on which humans and non-humans depend are themselves in a deepening crisis. To examine just three of the leading indicators of just one dimension of this crisis, global climate change:

- The Earth’s average temperature has risen an average of 0.2 degrees Celsius per decade since 1982, with the ten warmest years in the historical record all occurring in the past decade (2015-2024) (NOAA 2025).
- Current policies in place around the world are projected to result in about 2.6°C warming above pre-industrial levels (Climate Action Tracker 2026), which portends catastrophic changes to ecosystems and biogeophysical processes.
- The current projected increases in average global temperatures are predicted to result in an increase in dangerous heat waves, coastal flooding and sea level rise, an increase in the frequency and severity of wildfires, a more insecure food supply, and increased prevalence of disease (Smithsonian 2024)

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The Polycrisis and the 3 Es

A growing number of scholars and analysts have dubbed the intertwined ecological, social, political, and economic crises the **polycrisis:** a set of interlocking upheavals that are destabilizing ecosystems, societies, institutions, and economies. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report (2023) defines a polycrisis as "a cluster of interdependent global risks [that] create a compounding effect, such that their overall impact exceeds the sum of their individual parts" (World Economic Forum 2023). An increasing number of thinkers and leaders across sectors ranging from the international community (United Nations) to the global insurance industry, and spanning from the mainstream to heterodoxy, are using the term *polycrisis* to define the period in which we now live.

There are enough emerging signs and symptoms of a polycrisis to fill several lengthy volumes; there are also competing interpretations of the word itself. This paper, rather than trying to summarize these, explores some of the principles behind successful local and regional actions to *address* the polycrisis, focusing on the work of hybrid nonprofit organization Ecotrust in the region known as Salmon Nation, also known as the greater Pacific Northwest, which stretches from northern California through the southern coastal regions of Alaska. A wide range of organizations across sectors and geographies, including Ecotrust, have developed guiding principles and strategies for prioritizing, designing, co-creating, maintaining, and resourcing practices that can support human adaptation and thriving with natural systems. This paper will explain one such set of guiding principles known as the 3 E's: Equity, Ecology, and Economy.

Goals of this Paper

This paper has three goals:

1. To clarify and elaborate definitions of the 3 E's (equity, economy, ecology) and related concepts, as well as their limitations;
2. To help clarify and think through some of the ways that nonprofit organizations and businesses can define, apply, and assess their own performance in advancing the 3 Es; and
3. To recap some of Ecotrust's (and my) experiences in co-creating and supporting the 3 E's in the Salmon Nation / greater Pacific Northwest bioregion.

Positionality Statement

This paper is my own work based on 14+ years of professional experience at Ecotrust (2012-2026). It is informed by my research for my Ph.D in Economics from University of Massachusetts at Amherst (2003-12). It is also informed by my lived experience as a European American Jewish, cisgender male U.S. citizen and resident of Salmon Nation (Eugene, Oregon), with a keenly felt sense of social and ecological injustice that I seek to transform through the tools I have at my disposal.

This paper is not intended to represent a unified or consensus Ecotrust view, nor that of any particular department, program, or team thereof. Claims that I make about Ecotrust's approach will stem from a combination of my reading of Ecotrust's own written documents and my own observation and experience of how Ecotrust works, rather than implying a unified view from the staff, leadership, or Board level. I aim for this paper to be a reflection and exploration from one who has been present through several of Ecotrust's eras and transformations, including the last year of Spencer B. Beebe's tenure as our founding President (2012); the tenure of three subsequent Presidents/EDs and two interregnums (2013-2026); the establishment of The Redd on Salmon Street (2015); the establishment of our Core Values (2017), the

development of our 5-Year Strategic Plan (2021-2026); the ongoing evolution of Ecotrust CDE; and the founding of several of our core programs and services.

Ecotrust and the 3 Es

Ecotrust is a nonprofit organization, headquartered in Portland and with a service area throughout the greater Pacific Northwest (Northern CA to AK), whose mission is "to inspire fresh thinking that creates economic opportunity, social equity, and environmental well-being." Founded in 1991, as of writing it has recently celebrated its 35th birthday party with a series of gatherings and receptions in Portland (Ecotrust 2026).

Ecotrust is unusual among nonprofit organizations in several major respects. It is a hybrid organization that combines nonprofit and for-profit principles and business structures. It operates in a mid-sized stratum with 50-60 staff, larger than most grassroots organizations but smaller than a large-scale environmental NGO (e.g. World Resources Institute, The Nature Conservancy, etc.) or social service agency (e.g. United Way, Save the Children, etc.). And it is one of the few organizations in North America to operate *bioregionally*: as noted above, we work in and throughout the region known as Salmon Nation, which is defined by the range of the five species of Pacific salmon, from Northern California through the southern coastal regions of Alaska.

Over the 3+ decades since its founding, Ecotrust has incubated, co-created, owned, or co-owned a suite of for-profit subsidiaries that include a forestland investment management company (EFMI), a food hub (The Redd on Salmon Street), a series of event venues including the Billy Frank Jr. Conference Center, a Community Development Entity (CDE) to support tax credit financing, a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) called Craft3, and a civic-minded commercial bank (now called Beneficial State Bank). Since its founding, Ecotrust has leveraged $250-300 million in philanthropic investment into $4 billion in capital across these enterprises.[1]

The 3Es and the Triple Bottom Line

Ecotrust is a 3E organization that incubates triple-bottom-line enterprises. The distinction is meaningful: the phrases "3E" and "triple bottom line" are often used interchangeably, but they are not identical. The 3E idea originated first and is of broader scope; the triple bottom line originated as an application of the 3E concept to private, for-profit business. This section provides an overview of the 3Es, with an explanation of the Triple Bottom Line as one application of them, and identifies Ecotrust's work at the intersection of the two ideas.

Origins of the 3E Concept

The 3E concept was formalized and documented[2] in the report issued from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, titled *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) and often referred to as the Brundtland Commission Report (or just

[1] Beebe, Spencer (2026). *What it Takes: Ecotrust and Thirty-Five Years of Bioregional Finance in Salmon Nation.* Portland, OR: Ecotrust.

[2] I use the words *formalized* and *documented*, rather than *originated* or *created*, on purpose. A recent review of the 3E concept (Purvis et al. 2018) finds that "there is no single point of origin of this three-pillar conception, but rather a gradual emergence."

the Brundtland Report). This report advocated for pursuing simultaneously the three goals of environmental protection, social justice, and economic growth[3] through what the authors called *sustainable development*. The 3Es have been largely understood as three dimensions, sometimes called "pillars" of the broader concept of sustainable development.

The definition and valence of the 3E's has changed over time and is used differently across different organizations. To take the Environment/Ecology E as an example: whereas some organizations focus on environmental protection (e.g. pollution reduction) or land conservation, others stress ecological *resilience*, or managing human interactions with natural systems in ways that support the systems' ability to withstand, recover from, and adapt to shocks and long-term changes. Application of the 3 Es may differ widely based on the organization's stated mission, values, history, identity, core constituencies, and many other factors. The Es are considered together in a holistic vision, because each may be pursued in ways that are incompatible with the others. For instance, organizations focusing purely on economic growth or development are likely to ignore their impacts on ecosystems, the environment, and distributional equity. And organizations focusing purely on land conservation may ignore the concerns of local natural resource users (e.g. farmers, ranchers, harvesters), including those of Indigenous Tribes.[4]

The inherent openness to interpretation - some would say fuzziness - of the definition and application of the 3 Es is both a weakness and a strength. Most obviously, it is a weakness: a lack of well-specified theory of the 3 Es, their definitions, or how they interact means that there are no broadly accepted, well-defined benchmarks or indicators to determine whether they are being pursued sufficiently, or even at all. Moreover, the lack of precise definitions means that two groups of people can be using the exact same term to mean very different things. When those conflicting definitions emerge in project planning or implementation phases, they can become a significant barrier to progress.

However, less obviously, the openness to interpretation of 3 E definition can also be a strength. Concepts of equity, ecology/environment, and economic development can evolve and adapt to the needs of organizations and communities as conditions change. The application of the 3 Es can be adapted to the specific contexts, needs, aspirations, and goals of communities with dramatically different histories, lived experiences, cultures, and values. And the ongoing debate about the meaning of the 3 Es can be a source of mutual learning and exchange. Community leaders and supporters can co-design and co-create projects on the basis of mutually agreed-upon goals without having to precisely define the concepts that underpin these goals, nor agree precisely on the worldview that underpins the motivation for the project. They do, however, need to agree on project goals and objectives.

At the scale of communities and regions, at least, the 3 Es are a flexible enough concept to become the basis for a wide range of successful interventions. The burden it places on organizations seeking to

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[3] The Brundtland Commission's emphasis on economic *growth* followed over a decade of debate, including radical and systemic critiques of economic growth (e.g. Meadows et al 1972). The concept of *sustainable development* that arose from this commission represents an attempt to synthesize or triangulate across the viewpoints of pro-growth, anti-growth, and social justice-oriented thinkers. Many advocates for living within planetary boundaries are either openly critical of growth, or at least agnostic about whether economic growth is a worthwhile human goal. This paper does not attempt to take up this debate.

[4] More recently, due to the work of Indigenous rights' movements and codified in documents such as the Global Biodiversity Framework, land conservation efforts worldwide are increasingly undertaken in collaboration with Indigenous and local communities (e.g. Reytar, Veit, and von Braun 2024). Ecotrust's founding flagship project was a collaborative agreement with the Haisla First Nation of British Columbia to protect the Kitlope watershed through the formation of a protected area called Huchsduwachsdu Nuyem Jees/Kitlope Heritage Conservancy (BC Parks 2026).

communicate their achievements is that they must constantly define and redefine what they mean by these terms, both internally and for external audiences.

The Triple Bottom Line

The concept of a *triple bottom line* (3BL) derives from the business idea of a *bottom line* of profit that is often argued to be the ultimate goal of all business activity. The first known documented use of the term is from the business consultant and author John Elkington, who coined the term in 1994 (Elkington 2004). Due to the work of Elkington and other advocates, the business community began to circulate the idea of a *triple bottom line* that would measure the impact of business activity on people (workers and communities) and planet (the natural environment, including climate) in addition to that of profit (e.g. Miller 2020).

3BL businesses aim to produce and sell goods and services in ways that support the health and wellbeing of workers, local communities, the local environment, and the planet, while also turning a profit.[5] The triple bottom line is a narrower concept than the 3 Es because it aims to incorporate social and environmental concerns into the framework of a for-profit business. It does not necessarily aim to change the fundamental structure or mission of the business itself.

Since the 1990s, a range of alternative, legally defined business structures has arisen to facilitate more fundamental changes in the goals of enterprises. These include *benefit corporations*, an umbrella category that includes L3Cs (limited profit, limited liability corporations) and PBCs (public benefit corporations), as well as *perpetual purpose trusts*. The last 30 years have also witnessed a resurgence of cooperative businesses, which include *worker cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, producer cooperatives* (e.g. farmers), and *multi-stakeholder cooperatives*.[6] These structures are ways that 3BL organizations can transform themselves to be more like 3E organizations.

The 3 Es, Triple Bottom Line, and Ecotrust

The 3 Es, in Ecotrust's mission, refer to *economic opportunity*, *social equity*, and *ecological well-being* (including resilience, restoration, protection, or preservation). Ecotrust's Strategic Plan (Ecotrust 2020) states that Ecotrust aims to intervene in systems through targeted services and investments in ways that:

- Advance regional climate resilience, while centering the needs of and learning from frontline communities.
- Leverage organizational wealth, privilege, and power to dismantle systemic oppression and build broadly shared, intergenerational wealth for our region's communities, and
- Advance changes to lands and waters stewardship that are ecologically and culturally restorative, and racially and economically just.

Ecotrust is a *3E organization* that incubates, co-creates, and invests in *3BL* enterprises (e.g. EFMI, The Redd, Ecotrust CDE); and co-creates, delivers, and supports targeted programs and services (interventions) that aim to advance the 3 Es through related but distinct means. Over its 35 years, Ecotrust's 3E interventions have included (but are not limited to):

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[5] The triple bottom line has sometimes been called the 3 P's: people, planet, profit.
[6] For an overview of these alternative business structures, see Axelrod et al. (2023).

- Support for Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK) and Tribal sovereignty through recognition of Indigenous leaders, land re-acquisition, IT and technical support, building Communities of Practice, and supporting Tribal enterprises through low-cost capital investment;
- Workforce development and leadership development in occupations and industries that restore natural systems, culturally tailored to frontline communities (see below);
- Technical assistance, value chain coordination, and low-cost storage space for small businesses working in agriculture, fisheries, and other natural resource sectors;
- Geospatial and economic data analysis, community needs assessments, and program impact evaluation for mission-aligned initiatives; and
- Public communication, storytelling, mapping, research, and program evaluation in support of all of the above.

Integral to the equity component of our mission, we prioritize our support for **frontline communities**, defined as those that are being harmed first and worst by climate change and suffer injustices based on inborn characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, indigeneity, socioeconomic class, ability, and national origin.

Ecotrust's approach considers the 3 Es to be worthy goals of a wide range of human activity, not only private for-profit business. They can be applied at any scale, from the neighborhood to the planet. As noted above, previously thinkers (e.g. Brundtland *et al* 1987) grouped the 3 E's under the umbrella concept of "sustainability" or "sustainable development". However, Ecotrust generally does not treat *sustainability* as an appropriate umbrella goal that encompasses the 3 Es.[7] The concept of sustainability presupposes that there is a given set of activities, and a worldview that accompanies and justifies them, that ought to be sustained into the future. It ignores the necessity of changing or adapting one's activities in response to changing circumstances. Ecotrust's approach has instead stressed the importance of building *resilience,* or the capacity to adapt to while also influencing changes.[8] The resilience approach, as articulated by Silverman (2013), involves planning for change, continuous learning, a focus on relationship building, and a multi-scale approach: in short, a dynamic process of searching, tinkering, and constant adaptation.

The 3 Es are easy to recite like a laundry list, or invoke as a mantra or a 3-word motto. However, to design and implement a program that advances all of them at once is challenging and complex. Each of the 3 Es deserves its own attention; each has a rich history of both concepts and practice; and each contains hurdles that must be overcome. The following sections attempt to summarize these.

Defining the 3E Concepts

The 3 E's are often recited as a motto or mantra to guide decision-making; however, their definitions are often left unexamined, leading to confusion or even divergent definitions among decision-makers. This section offers brief, probing definitions of the concepts with reference both to their origins and their origins.

[7] Ecotrust sometimes uses the word "sustainability" or "sustainable" in a more narrow, limited sense and in ways that follow our partners' language and the scientific literature. For example, some of our fisheries work has referred to "sustainable fisheries."

[8] See Silverman, Howard (2013), *Resilience and Transformation*. Portland, OR: Ecotrust.

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Equity

A succinct definition of social equity comes from the nonprofit think tank PolicyLink: “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential” (PolicyLink 2018). The National Academy of Public Administration offers a more elaborate definition: “the fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; and the fair and equitable distribution of public services, and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy” (United Way 2021).

A perspective rooted in social equity acknowledges that disparities in economic well-being, social status, health, and other dimensions exist, are caused by systemic factors, and works to counteract those disparities through deliberate interventions. Nonprofit organizations (including Ecotrust), social enterprises, and government agencies have, to varying degrees, attempted to design programs, businesses, and policies in ways that attempt to correct for systemic disparities.

Systemic disparities are rooted in how economic, social, and political systems function. Racial disparities are some of the most persistent and severe disparities in the United States. They are rooted in the origins of the U.S. economic system, which was dependent on racialized slavery until 1865 and included legal segregation until a century later. For nearly 200 years (1789-1965), U.S. political and legal systems codified the economic system of racialized slavery into legislation and law. In the U.S. until 1865, Black Americans were considered property of white enslavers, and were denied basic human rights including the right to vote and own property. The economic disadvantages resulting from these injustices have persisted to this day in racial disparities in income, wealth, property ownership, and educational attainment. Racial disparities in health and life expectancy have also resulted from unequal access to health care, as well as environmental injustices stemming from unequal political power to control the actions of polluters.

Indigenous North Americans are also considered a separate racialized group, and the conquest and theft of their land were integral to the formation of the United States and enshrined in legislation and law. To take just a few of the harms suffered by Indigenous people of the United States:

- Theft of millions of acres of land (1619-present);
- Forcible assimilation to European (white) American culture via abusive boarding schools for over 150 years (1819-1978);
- Not considered citizens for the majority of U.S. history (1789-1924);
- Termination of over 100 tribes’ status as sovereign nations (1953-1968); following the forcible reorganization or consolidation of hundreds of tribes during the 19th century

Gender disparities in income and wealth, originating in the denial of women’s political and economic rights, including the right to vote, until 1912, also persist to this day. Though in recent decades women have closed the educational attainment gap and now slightly exceed men in average years of schooling, gender disparities in income and wealth persist.

Race and gender are only two of many disparities in life outcomes prevalent in the United States today. Sexual orientation, gender expression, national origin, religious beliefs or traditions, physical ability, skin color (in addition to and distinct from race), and other inborn or ascriptive (assigned at birth) characteristics dramatically affect life outcomes. The origins of the United States economic, political and social system as a racialized and gendered hierarchy dominated by European descendant (white), heterosexual, Christian, property-owning male landowners and enslavers, has set our economic, social,

and political systems on a path to provide more advantages to people with more of these characteristics, and more disadvantages to people with less of them. The result of this system is a country with the highest level of income and wealth inequality, and the lowest average life expectancy, in the industrialized world.

An equity orientation, thus, aims to address these disparities by designing programs, projects, and policies to benefit most those with the greatest disadvantages.

Ecology / Environment

Ecology is a scientific discipline with a foundation in respect and care for the living world. The Ecological Society of America (ESA) defines ecology as follows:

> Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them. Ecology also provides information about the benefits of **ecosystems** and how we can use Earth's resources in ways that leave the environment healthy for future generations. (ESA 2026)

The word "ecology" comes from the combination of two Greek words: *oikos* meaning household, and *logos* meaning "the study of".

A large part of ecology consists of the study of ecosystems, which are defined as "a geographic area that includes all of the organisms and nonliving parts of their physical environment" (ESA 2026). Living and nonliving components of ecosystems often interact in ways that benefit human communities; these interactions are called **ecosystem services.** Ecosystem services include water filtration, oxygen production, pollination, absorbing and detoxifying pollutants, temperature regulation, nutrient provision, and others.

Some practitioners of the 3 Es use the word Environment in place of, or in addition to, Ecology. According to ESA, "the environment is the surroundings of an organism including the physical and chemical environment, and other organisms with which it comes into contact. This term is most frequently used in a human context, often referring to factors affecting our quality of life." (ESA 2026) Environmental outcomes, in a human context, are those that directly affect our health and quality of life, through clean air, clean water, healthy soils, and other benefits.

Economy

A succinct definition of *economy* is: "(a) system of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services" (National Geographic Society 2026). *Economics,* the formal study of the economy, emerged as an academic discipline in the late 18th century with the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Like the word *ecology*, the origins of the word *economy* are ancient Greek: *oikos* (household) + *nomos* (laws, rules of action, or customs). The ancient Greek word for economy (*oikonomia*) did not originally refer to an academic discipline, but rather to the activity of household management. The leading philosopher of classical Greece, Aristotle, drew a distinction between *oikonomia,* or household management for well-being (*eudaimonia*), and *chrematistike,* which referred to activities undertaken for the sole purpose of making money (Raworth 2023).

The economic component of the 3 Es can refer to several dimensions of economic life, including opportunity, growth, prosperity, and development.[9] These four terms are not synonyms, and their use affects the way that economic decisions are made. Take economic *growth* and *development*, for example. In mainstream economic thinking, "development" is often taken as a synonym for "growth"; but this conflation is an error. Daly and Farley (2011) draw a distinction between growth, defined as "a **quantitative** increase in size," and development, defined as "the increase in the **quality** of goods and services, as defined by their ability to increase human well-being." Jane Jacobs, in her work *The Nature of Economies* (2000), defines development as "differentiation emerging out of generality." As economist Herman Daly once put it succinctly, "When something grows, it gets bigger. When something develops, it gets different." (Daly and Townsend 1993)

Integration or Tradeoffs?

The academic and professional literature on the 3 Es is split between thinkers who focus on the importance and possibility of *integrating* the 3 E's, and those who believe in the inevitability of *tradeoffs* between them (Purvis *et al* 2018). Ecotrust's approach fits squarely within the category of **integration**. Ecotrust's work aims to co-design, co-create, incubate, and implement programs, services, and investments that integrate or weave together all 3 E's in service of a holistic vision of well-being that encompasses humans and non-humans, and present and future generations.The mainstream economics profession, by contrast, stresses the inevitability of a tradeoff between equity in the distribution of resources, and efficiency in the allocation thereof (e.g. Okun 1974).[10]

Recent studies support Ecotrust's view that integrating the 3 Es is possible, though not inevitable. For instance, statistical and historical analyses have shown the ways that more equitable distributions of economic resources are often associated with a wide variety of measures of health and wellbeing (e.g. Pickett and Wilkinson 2010), and how broad-based distribution of education and infrastructure supports economic growth at the regional level (Truehaft *et al* 2011). Others have shown how, despite the claims of deregulationists and free-market advocates, environmental protection does not lead to a sacrifice in job creation (Goodstein 1999).

The newer studies referenced above provide documented evidence for the viability of Ecotrust's integrative approach. The next section examines the way in which Ecotrust ensures integration of the 3 E's through its 3E Scorecard.

Integrating the 3 Es: Ecotrust's Scorecard[11]

As stated above, Ecotrust operates on the premise that the 3 Es can be integrated into program, service, and investment design at the local and regional level. In order to ensure that 3E concerns are addressed and integrated systematically, in 2021 a collaborative working group led by Ecotrust's Chief Impact Officer, Olivia Rebanal, and including the Measurement and Evaluation (M&E) team consisting of myself (Noah Enelow) and Denise Chin, designed a 3E Scorecard. The working group solicited input and

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[9] Ecotrust's mission refers to creating economic *opportunity*; in related publications and talks, Ecotrust leaders and staff often refer to economic *prosperity* and/or economic *development*. Ecotrust uses these terms in specific ways that often depart from mainstream economic thinking.

[10] Despite the title of his essay, Okun believed that there were ways for democratic societies to improve equity (or "equality" as he called it) without too much sacrifice of efficiency, including progressive taxation.

[11] In September of 2026, the entire Ecotrust M&E team was laid off due to a severe fiscal crisis; as a result, the status of the 3E scorecard is uncertain. This section is thus written in the past tense.

feedback from across the entire organization, including its Leadership Team, Equity Working Group, BIPOC Affinity Group, Cross-Program Team, and five separate programmatic teams: Forestry, Food Systems, Ecotrust Investments, Knowledge Systems, and Ecotrust CDE.[12] We then scored ten Ecotrust programs in close collaboration with their managers, in a process we called the "3E Scoring Challenge." Once the 3E Scoring Challenge was complete, we solicited an additional round of feedback from the program managers who had participated in the scoring, and updated the Scorecard to a second version with a more fine-grained range of scores.

The second version of the Scorecard consisted of six scores in a 3x2 matrix. The rows of the matrix consisted of three aspects of the program to be scored: Mission, Governance/Decision-Making, and Impact. The columns of the matrix consisted of two of the E's: Environment and Economy. Equity concerns were integrated into all six cells in the matrix. Each cell in the matrix was scored from 0 to 5, with a maximum score of 30.[13] The scorecard provided illustrative guiding language to define each score for each cell in the matrix.

Typically the process of 3E scoring was led by the manager or director of the program or project to be scored, in consultation with a staff member from the M&E team, at the outset of the project. If the program or project was in its infancy, the Impact row was scored provisionally based on best available information, with the knowledge that its actual impact was yet to be determined. Once the program or project was up and running, the Impact (and possibly Governance) rows could be re-scored based on the emerging reality of how it was run and who benefited from it. Any program or project that received a score of 0 in any of its cells would be reconsidered or redesigned, or else not pursued. A blank scorecard with no scoring guidance is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1: Ecotrust's 3E Scorecard - Blank Copy

	Environment / Equity	**Economy / Equity**	**Total**
Mission	Version 1: 0-3 Version 2: 0-5	Version 1: 0-3 Version 2: 0-5	*Version 1: 0-6* *Version 2: 0-10*
Governance/Decision-Making	Version 1: 0-3 Version 2: 0-5	Version 1: 0-3 Version 2: 0-5	*Version 1: 0-6* *Version 2: 0-10*
Impact	Version 1: 0-3 Version 2: 0-5	Version 1: 0-3 Version 2: 0-5	*Version 1: 0-6* *Version 2: 0-10*
Total	*Version 1: 0-9* *Version 2: 0-15*	*Version 1: 0-9* *Version 2: 0-15*	*Version 1: 0-18* *Version 2: 0-30*

The 3E scorecard guiding language incorporated the Restorative Economics Framework (Agbo 2021) into its criteria. For a project to receive a score of 5 in the "Mission- Economy / Equity" cell (highlighted in green above), it must hold to the principles of Restorative Economics as follows:

> The project intends to dismantle systemic oppression and create intergenerational wealth. The project may create intergenerational wealth through acquisition of community assets including land and real estate, revitalization of existing community capacities, and/or acquisition of new

[12] The teams consulted reflected Ecotrust's structure as of 2021; since that year the organization's structure has changed, and not all the teams listed still exist.
[13] The first version of the Scorecard consisted of scores from 0 to 3, with a maximum score of 18.

> capacities that are chosen by frontline communities. The project will reduce racial wealth disparities and catalyze prosperity in frontline communities. The intended outcome includes economic self-determination for frontline communities and/or economic self-determination for all members of the tribal community.

To receive a score of 4 in the same cell, the project must work to build community economic autonomy, as follows:

> The project intends to create economic autonomy for frontline communities, including self-employment, entrepreneurship, access to capital, networking, and other assets or asset-building opportunities, including land and real estate. The project may offer quality job or livelihood creation, career pathway building, portable certificates/credentials, and/or other capacity building opportunities, appropriate to and in the manner chosen by frontline community members. The project will reduce racial wealth disparities.

Integration of the 3 Es requires clear criteria for assessment and decision-making, as well as skillful design and implementation of programs and services, patient capital and philanthropic investment, and clear outcome metrics that identify the ways in which the program, service, or investment will address each of the 3 Es. Ecotrust's 3E Scorecard provided a detailed set of assessment criteria along with guidance for how to design and implement interventions in ways that integrate the 3 Es. Over the course of its usage from 2021-2026, Ecotrust M&E team and colleagues used the 3E Scorecard to evaluate about 25 total programmatic grant-funded projects and New Markets Tax Credit transactions. The scores were a useful shorthand for communicating the alignment of a project with the 3 E's.

The next section provides a case study on one of the ways in which Ecotrust and its partners have done this: the Green Workforce Collaborative and Academy.

Case Study: Green Workforce Collaborative and Academy

This case study and first-person account summarizes Ecotrust's role in the formation of the Green Workforce Collaboration (GWC) and Academy (GWA), and reflects the perspective and lived experience of its author in doing so, including lessons I learned about applying the 3 Es to a specific intervention or program. It does not aim to be a comprehensive or objective account of the formation of the Collaborative or Academy, nor an evaluation of its impact.[14]

The Green Workforce Collaborative (GWC) is a Portland-based coalition of nonprofits devoted to building economic and environmental justice through workforce readiness training, and inclusive of culturally specific organizations from Black and Indigenous communities in Greater Portland. The GWC includes The Blueprint Foundation; Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA); Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI); Wisdom of the Elders; and Ecotrust. Collaborative members represent the communities they serve, and the members' staff act as classroom teachers, field site instructors, and mentors.

The GWC operates the Green Workforce Academy (GWA), a 5-week paid training opportunity that is culturally targeted to Black, Indigenous, and other adults of color in Portland, Oregon. The GWA includes

[14] As of writing (August 2026), an evaluation of the impact of the GWA is currently being undertaken by Ecotrust's M&E Team, led by Denise Chin.

both classroom learning and hands-on work experience at field sites, and combines environmental education, career and financial education, and workforce readiness (Ecotrust 2026).

Ecotrust became involved in developing the GWC and GWA through its engagement in environmental justice issues in Greater Portland, beginning in 2015. In that year, Ecotrust developed a partnership with Portland-based environmental justice nonprofit Verde and national policy think tank PolicyLink. The partnership resulted in the 2017 report, *Jobs and Equity in the Urban Forest*, a study of the barriers, opportunities, and potential impact of advancing social and racial equity in urban forestry and green infrastructure fields. The report was funded by the US Forest Service's National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council (NUCFAC). Noah Enelow and Brody Abbott led the research effort for Ecotrust. Researching the report required Ecotrust staff (Noah and Brody) to interview a wide range of urban environmental professionals in Greater Portland: urban foresters including arboriculturists, green infrastructure developers, soil and water conservationists, environmental justice advocates, community organizers, city officials, landscape architects, watershed restorationists, and workforce development specialists. Through this intensive networking process, we became acquainted with community organizer and collaborative designer Edward B. ("Eddie") Hill, who invited us to join an EPA-led working group entitled Making a Visible Difference. This group aimed to advance four interrelated goals: air quality improvements, brownfield remediation and cleanup, green stormwater infrastructure, and green workforce development, all focusing on economically distressed, polluted, and underinvested areas of the city.

Through these convened meetings, which included 20-30 participants at one time, we became known to the environmental justice and urban conservation communities in Portland. In a meeting that occurred at the Portland Zen Center in 2016, each of the four goals split into breakout groups. We (Noah and Brody) joined the Green Workforce Development breakout group and became acquainted with Dr. Derron Coles, founder of The Blueprint Foundation. We also met Rose High Bear, co-founder of Wisdom of the Elders (Wisdom), a Portland-based Indigenous knowledge and education nonprofit that included a workforce development component. All three of these organizers were clear in their intention to create a green workforce development program that was culturally targeted to Black and Indigenous communities in Greater Portland, and oriented toward racial and environmental justice as well as developing marketable job skills and connections to employers.

During this time, Edward Hill was working at Portland-based adaptive reuse organization The ReBuilding Center. With support from Mary Lou Soscia at EPA, he applied to Meyer Memorial Trust (MMT) to advance a planning grant to develop a green workforce collaborative and academy. In 2016, with funding from the planning grant, Edward worked with our team, Dr. Coles, and others to convene a participatory planning session at the Billy Frank Jr. Conference Center (BFJCC) to map out the elements of what such a program could look like. Present and participating actively in that session were representatives from Wisdom, Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) and Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI). Also present and participating in the session were environmentally oriented local employers, such as arboriculture company Treecology and design-build firm Blossom.

With the knowledge we gained and networks we had woven from the participatory planning session, in 2016 we wrote our first full proposal to MMT for $150,000 over three years to establish a Green Workforce Collaborative (GWC). Noah, Brody, Edward Hill, Derron Coles, and Rose High Bear all contributed extensive content to the proposal, and Ecotrust submitted it to MMT. It was accepted in November 2016, and included NAYA and SEI as grantees along with Ecotrust, The Blueprint Foundation, Wisdom of the Elders, and The ReBuilding Center. In winter 2017, the GWC began to meet and develop a

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that would define each organization's role and responsibilities in the Collaborative.

The purpose of the Collaborative was to found and launch a Green Workforce Academy (GWA) that would open the world of environmental stewardship to Black, Indigenous, and people of color in Portland through culturally targeted methods, including field site visits and hands-on volunteer opportunities. We envisioned this world broadly, encompassing urban forestry, watershed restoration, renewable energy, green neighborhood development, park development, landscape design and implementation, urban agriculture, water conservation, recycling and waste management, adaptive reuse of materials, and beyond.

As a (then) majority-white and white-led organization, Ecotrust showed up to these conversations as an ally, willing to listen to, learn from, and co-create programs and targeted interventions to meet community needs as defined and articulated by community leaders with relevant lived experience. We tried as best we could to get our own preconceptions, assumptions, or predefined approaches out of the way, and instead focus on developing the work according to the aspirations, goals, and needs of the partner organizations. The result of this labor of listening was Ecotrust's first co-created program tailored to benefit urban BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, of color) people and communities, and to date one of its most durable programs. Had we not shown up in the way we did - as an ally ready to listen, learn, and contribute in the ways we were asked - we could not have played the role we did in co-creating the Academy.

In the early days of the GWC, at the request of the Collaborative partners, Ecotrust provided administrative ("backbone") support services; proposal writing; partnership coordination and facilitation; and event and meeting space. In the course of meetings, Ecotrust proposed curriculum ideas, but did not make final decisions about them; Ecotrust made suggestions on the goals and objectives of the GWA, but our word was not final. Ecotrust and Blueprint Foundation collaboratively decided on goals, objectives, outcomes, and metrics for the first MMT grant. Ecotrust also provided initial drafts of grant budgets, and revised them based on feedback from partners.

The GWA launched in summer 2019, the third and final year of the original MMT grant. As of writing, the GWA is in its seventh year, and has trained over 120 adults in Portland to date. Teresa Gaddy, Director of Workforce Development at Ecotrust, has provided partnership coordination, co-developed curriculum, and led the delivery of instruction for the last seven years. Site visits have included arboriculture company Treecology; the Bonneville Dam; a forest-based retreat center operated by family services nonprofit Parrott Creek; Black-owned urban farm Mudbone Grown; Tryon Creek State Natural Area; Sustainable Northwest Wood lumber yard; The ReBuilding Center; Forest Park; Metro Oregon waste transfer center; Oregon State University’s Food Innovation Center; the Portland Harbor Superfund site; Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge; and many more.[15]

Applying the 3E Scorecard to GWA

Two years after the program’s inception (2021), the GWA Manager, Teresa Gaddy, used the 3E Scorecard (Version 1) to assess the performance of the GWA relative to the 3 Es as part of the 3E

[15] Updates on GWA’s activities, including site visits, can be found on its Instagram site, greenworkforcepdx.

Scoring Challenge (see above). In this version of the scorecard, each cell was given scores ranging from 0-3, with a maximum score of 18 across all six cells.

The GWA received a score of 14 out of a maximum of 18, which characterized it as a "3E project". For example, in the Mission - Environment/Equity cell, the project received a score of 2 out of a maximum of 3. A score of 2 indicated that the project supported "Restoration and Stewardship." The justification for this score was:

> GWA trains Black and Indigenous adults in stewardship skills that are applicable to careers in green industries and occupations. Field training introduces trainees to a range of environmental programs and companies, including Portland BES, Earth Advantage, Solar Oregon, Treecology, and Arcadis (waste remediation). GWA reduces disparities in access to stewardship skills.

A score of 3 would indicate that the project supported "Climate Justice and Resilience". The justification for *not* giving the program a 3 was as follows:

> GWA is *adjacent to* larger systemic change efforts that include asset acquisition by frontline communities, such as Mudbone Grown and Good Rain Farm. Trainees are exposed to and engage with these efforts. However, GWA is not primarily centered on systemic change movements.

Similarly, the Mission - Economy/Equity cell, the GWA received a score of 2.5, meaning that it combined elements of a score of 2, defined as Economic Livelihood, and a score of 3, defined as Restorative Economics. The assessment concluded:

> The GWA's objectives include career-track, family-supporting jobs in environmental sectors for Black and Indigenous adults. The GWA includes networking that creates linkages to internships, fellowships, pre-apprenticeships, certificates, and other programs.

Explaining why the GWA did not merit a score of 3 in this category, the assessment stated:

> The GWA intends to dismantle systemic oppression in green industries through empowering Black and Indigenous community members, as well as engaging destination employers in anti-racist training. However, it does not lead directly to intergenerational wealth, but only indirectly and over time through career-track employment.

A complete set of scores for the Green Workforce Academy is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Green Workforce Academy's 3E Scorecard (Version 1)

	Environment / Equity	**Economy / Equity**	**Total**
Mission	2	2.5	**4.5**
Governance/Decision-Making	2.5	3	**5.5**
Impact	2	2	**4**

Total	**6.5**	**7.5**	**14**

Achievements and Limitations of GWA

Assessing the GWA according to the 3E Scorecard helped the analysts (Teresa and Noah) clarify both the achievements of the GWA and its limitations. We came to understand the GWA as a specific labor market intervention, oriented toward career development and workforce readiness for its beneficiaries. The GWA achieves its goals through educating people who have suffered underinvestment in skills, knowledge, and networks about industries and occupations related to environmental stewardship, as well as building professional networks and core employability skills. It does not aim to directly challenge the systems of oppression that result in underinvestment in skills, knowledge, and networks in the first place.

Acknowledging this limitation does not invalidate the GWA's achievements, but rather points out the importance of complementary 3E interventions at Ecotrust and our partner organizations, including:

- Leadership development, which Ecotrust pursues through its co-created program Madrona Fellowship;
- Financial and organizational support for asset acquisition, which Ecotrust pursues through its Upwell program as well as its Community Development Entity (CDE);
- Technical assistance for small businesses and entrepreneurs, which Ecotrust pursues through its Resilient Food Futures program; and
- Policy advocacy (which Ecotrust does not pursue).

Limitations of the 3 Es and Western Culture

The 3 Es have been structuring principles of Ecotrust's work since its founding in 1991, and orienting around them has produced measurable benefits: founding and co-founding multiple 3BL businesses, financial institutions, networks, training programs, and services that protect and restore ecosystems while advancing the aspirations of frontline communities. Yet the 3 Es are not universal in their origins or definition. They are rooted in Western (Greek) and specifically Western European and American cultures, and their limitations are bound up with the limitations and histories of those cultures.

The words for all three of the Es are rooted in ancient Greek, and the earliest thinkers to define two of them (equity and economy) lived and wrote during the classical period in Greece. Aristotle defined equity (*epieikeia*) as justice beyond the letter of the law, or, in a widespread (1953) translation, "a rectification of law in so far as law is defective on account of its generality" (Ethics, p. 200).[16] Classical Greek thinkers, including Xenophon and Aristotle, defined economy (*oikonomia*) roughly as "household management" and advanced theories for how to do so in ways that benefit the larger human community, while assuming a social structure that included a male head-of-household and a staff of enslaved people to support household functioning. [17]

From the 17th to the mid-20th century, the concepts underlying *equity* and *economy* were taken up by English, French, and Anglo-American thinkers. In the case of equity, these included, most influentially,

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[16] Aristotle. *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by J.A.K. Thomson. London: Penguin Books, 1953.

[17] Aristotle. *Politics.* Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Cambridge, MA: MIT. URL: The Internet Classics Archive | Politics by Aristotle. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885.

John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Rawls.[18] With these thinkers came their limitations and those of their cultures. Moloney and Lewis (2023) point out that these thinkers, whose work has defined the topic in the public sphere, all base their ideas on social contract theory, an approach based on abstraction from history, thus ignoring the enslavement, conquest, and genocide that are embedded in the history of the West.

The trajectory of economics, meanwhile, has moved even farther from the original ancient Greek conception. Deviating from Adam Smith's (1776) theories of economics as a branch of moral philosophy, contemporary mainstream economics has divorced itself from ethical positions entirely, and oriented itself entirely toward the relationship between means and ends (or goals), without subjecting the goals of economic activity to any ethical critique (Leshem 2016).

The purpose of this discussion is not to invalidate the concepts of the 3 Es by virtue of their being Western in origin. It is, rather, to point out that the concepts and applications of the 3 Es, as they are largely understood in the 21st-century United States, were developed in specific cultural and national contexts, by thinkers with specific blind spots toward these nations' own histories. A belief in universal human rights, including the rights to land and political representation, entails that we adapt and evolve the 3 Es, rather than use them in ways received from the past. These adaptations have been ongoing in the wake of the civil rights, feminist, and anticolonial movements that began in the 1960s and are ongoing.

Targeted Universalism and Evolution of the 3 Es

The meaning and application of the 3 Es need not draw exclusively from Western philosophical traditions, and may evolve as cross-cultural and transnational philosophical exchanges and social movements develop. Nearly every documented culture worldwide contains concepts of right and wrong, well-being and its opposite, justice and injustice, sufficiency and excess, and care or stewardship of the earth and its creatures. There is a rich emerging literature explicating concepts of social equity and the public good through the lens of Indigenous (multiple continents and traditions), Buddhist, Islamic, African (multiple traditions), Afro-Caribbean, Confucian, and other philosophical traditions (briefly reviewed in Moloney and Lewis 2023). In the realm of ecology and natural sciences, the approach of "two-eyed seeing," or weaving together Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, holds the promise of deepening humans' knowledge of the natural world and understanding how best to live within it (e.g. Kelly 2025).

Adaptation and evolution of the 3 Es may also be spurred by recent political changes, including authoritarian governance that censors or bans the equity language developed in the 2010s (and on which large sections of this paper rely). The rise of authoritarianism in the United States and other countries is a symptom of - among other things - political polarization, in which members of different politically aligned groups view themselves not merely as ideological opponents, but existential enemies.

The concept of Targeted Universalism (TU) may offer a path through these harmful developments. TU frames social policy in terms of universal goals for human wellbeing, implemented by strategies that are targeted to particular groups based on their histories and circumstances. The concept is summarized succinctly as: "An approach that supports the needs of the particular while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric." (powell, Menendian, and Ake 2019) This approach makes space for disadvantages or hardships that may be suffered by individuals or communities who have characteristics

[18] In the 19th century, to those two concepts was added *ecology,* a term coined by German biologist Ernst Haeckel from ancient Greek roots (*oikos* + *logos*).

that are historically associated with privilege (e.g. white, male, cisgender). TU-based policy and practice accounts for people's lived experiences of oppression based on race, gender, and other characteristics, but does not ignore the ways in which existing systems fail even people who do not suffer from these oppressions.

Ways Forward

Recent political developments, including the backlash to equity and retreat from climate action, suggest that the 3 Es may be showing signs of wear. It may be time to work toward adapting some of our principles to the new reality, in ways that do not compromise our ethics. Possible ways forward for equity-centered organizations, including Ecotrust, may be twofold: (1) Adopt the principles and language of TU to clarify the aspirational goals toward which we aspire in ways that inspire people from all backgrounds across our region, and (2) deepen dialogues with historically oppressed groups, including Tribes and Indigenous organizations, in revitalizing and updating these principles, in ways that are non-appropriative, respectful of Tribes, and cultivate harmony with human and non-human communities. Pursuing these two pathways in concert with one another may provide the most effective guidance for the next chapter of Ecotrust and other similarly minded nonprofit organizations.

Conclusion

There is no one correct way to define or implement the 3 Es in a program, project, investment, or policy. However, there are common ingredients to any 3 E intervention, and their common thread is *relationships*: cooperative and reciprocal relationships between people in and across human communities; relationships between people and the land and non-human communities; and availability of seed resources (or philanthropic or patient capital) to activate these relationships in ways that achieve desired outcomes. These are the 3 E analogues to the mainstream economic factors of production of land, labor and capital: land / non-human communities, cooperation / reciprocity, and seed resources or philanthropic capital.

Relationships of reciprocity and mutual concern are the key prerequisite for advancing wellbeing. If human communities and organizations, and the individuals that comprise them, are to overcome the recent and profound assaults on the wellbeing of people and planet; if we are to find workable management actions that can lead us through the global climate crisis; and if we are to persist in our attempts to forge a society in the image of the 3 Es - socially equitable, ecologically just and resilient, and economically prosperous - we must work tirelessly to counter systems that isolate us from one another and pit our interests against each other's.

Yet the actions of individuals and programmatic interventions of private organizations alone cannot add up to an equitable, ecologically resilient, and environmentally clean and healthy society. Implementing the 3 Es at the macro level must include rules, mandates, and taxation on the one hand, and incentives and subsidies on the other, to complement discrete individual actions and organizational interventions. One important reason for this has been long known in the field of economics. In a world governed by market transactions, as ours is, transactions undertaken only for the benefit of the buyer and seller have impacts on third parties that may be either negative or positive. These impacts are called *externalities*. A central goal of public policy, if it is to pursue the common good, is to discourage transactions with negative externalities, through taxation or regulation, and encourage those with positive externalities, through incentives or subsidies. Another reason, lesser known in economics but well known to historians, is *path dependency*. Historical patterns of property ownership, rights, privileges, and hierarchies - rooted in

histories of conquest, theft, and enslavement - have all combined to determine today's patterns of wealth, income, and access to political rights and representation.

In short, we are facing an uphill battle in 2026. Individuals and organizations for whom the 3 Es are mission critical, and who are fortunate enough to hold surplus resources[19], are charged with the task of providing the seed resources toward community organizations with strong internal and external networks, and relationships to the land and biotic communities. The actions of these organizations will build toward revitalized movements to advance the 3 Es on every level, from the household and neighborhood to the national and global. But without trust, humility, and solidarity with those with lived experiences of oppression, philanthropic support will be ineffective and seed resources will not bear fruit.[20]

In August 2026, over 2 million acres of forest and grassland in Oregon caught fire. These lands are disproportionately concentrated in the reduced lands, or reservations, onto which Indigenous Tribes, such as the Warm Springs, were pushed during the colonizations and genocides of the 19th century. Their destruction is a testament to the United States' mismanagement of resources in Western North America, the suppression of Indigenous cultures including traditions of fire management, as well as a symptom of the global climate crisis. Developing interventions that address these destructive tendencies will be the task of Ecotrust and its partner organizations in the 21st century, to which our coming organizational change must take heed.

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[19] Including: foundations, wealthy individuals, well-resourced nonprofits, and civic-minded private businesses.
[20] Villanueva (2021) and Hunt-Hendrix (2025) are two recent contributors to the philanthropic literature on these topics. Giridharas (2018) offers a diagnosis of the ills of the philanthropic sector.

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