



Solutions to Preserve and Protect Freshwater Around the World

Building Empathy + Design Sprint Offerings Help Identify Sticking Points & Solutions

Freshwater ecosystems are some of the most diverse in the world, richer in species per unit area than ecosystems on land or in the ocean. Rivers, lakes, and wetlands are home to a vast number of unique species — including otters, caimans, manatees, spoonbills, and elephant fish — amounting to one-third of the world’s vertebrates and half the fish species.

But the planet’s freshwater ecosystems face threats from overfishing, over-extraction, and over-engineering, and are commonly left out of conservation efforts. The results have been far-reaching and severe: half the world’s wetlands have been lost over the last century; two-thirds of rivers have lost their connection back to the sea; freshwater species have plummeted by 83% since 1970; and half of all people don’t have enough reliable drinking water.

TEAM:

[Durable Freshwater Protection](#)

PROJECT:

Resources for TNC colleagues working on freshwater protection

AGILITY LAB OFFERING:

Building Empathy + Design Sprint

TNC 2030 IMPACT GOAL: Safeguard or restore at least 1 million kilometers of rivers and streams; conserve 30 million hectares of lakes, wetlands, deltas and floodplains; and ensure over 10 million people benefit directly from healthy freshwater ecosystems.

Good news: The damage can be reversed, and The Nature Conservancy's Durable Freshwater Protection (DFP) team is working to both protect and restore freshwater using long-lasting strategies. That includes adjusting and removing dams and other barriers on rivers, helping farmers keep fertilizers out of fields and waterways, and partnering with communities to protect freshwater. By 2030, The Nature Conservancy seeks to safeguard or restore at least 1 million kilometers of rivers and streams; conserve 30 million hectares of lakes, wetlands, deltas, and floodplains; and ensure over 10 million people benefit directly from healthy freshwater ecosystems.



To achieve these goals, the DFP team sought to better understand the needs of their TNC colleagues so that they could more effectively help them achieve their goals related to durable freshwater protection, defined as dedicated, long-lasting, sustainably financed protection for freshwater ecosystems, species, and their surfaces. DFP Team Lead Robin Abell said the team recognized sticking points that needed to be addressed in supporting the work throughout TNC and began working with The Agility Lab to better understand their colleagues' needs and provide resources.

“We know that there's quite a bit of interest and appetite across The Nature Conservancy's business units for doing more around durable freshwater protection, but we also know that many of our colleagues have gaps in capacity, understanding, time, or resources that sometimes present roadblocks in terms of actually getting this work started or carrying it through,” Abell said. “What we really wanted to do is understand how our small global team can develop tools, resources, and guidance to help our colleagues around The Nature Conservancy to do durable freshwater protection.”

Listening to Stories and Needs

The DFP reached out to The Agility Lab to overcome feeling “fixed” in their thinking. They wanted additional perspectives and approaches to better understand the roadblocks and translate that into products and activities that the team could either undertake themselves or catalyze to help address the needs.

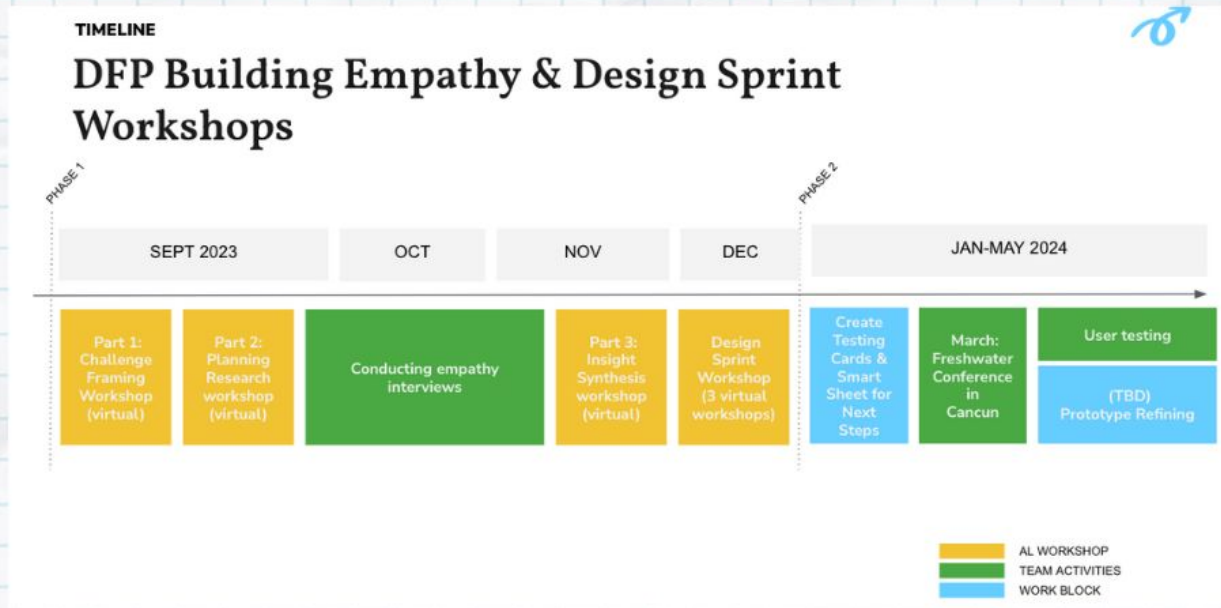


Protecting freshwater ecosystems will increase resilience against a changing climate and ensure continued livelihoods for the hundreds of millions of people who depend on healthy freshwater ecosystems for their food and water security, including the villagers shown above walking along the banks of the Ganges River in Haridwar. Photo by Mark Daffey for TNC.

The Agility Lab Engagement Manager Gayatri Shetty and Program Manager Alexia Preston recommended The Agility Lab's Building Empathy offering paired with its Design Sprint workshop so that the DFP team could collect rich feedback about the specific needs of their colleagues related to durable freshwater protection-related work. Based on the insights from the empathy interviews, the team could develop initial ideas for a new support model with accessible DFP-related resources.

Planning for the engagement began around late summer 2023, and facilitator Rae Abileah led the DFP team through both the Building Empathy and Design Sprint process from late fall to early January 2024. This included three workshops, a research phase, and a sprint spread over several days (see graphic timeline, next page). DFP's central question in the empathy research and sprint was: "How might we better meet the needs of TNC staff for building, strengthening, and expanding durable freshwater protection in places in service of bending the curve of freshwater biodiversity loss and delivering value to local communities and beyond?"

Abileah said though the team had a Theory of Change and mandate to expand durable freshwater protection in certain places, they wanted to align on how to meet and prioritize all the needs of TNC staff, and what type of DFP resources staff needed to get past their own team's pain points. The team also wanted to develop resources putting Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLC) in the center. They began the process by interviewing key stakeholders, including TNC country-level protection directors, conservation directors, and strategy leads, as well as experts on freshwater science, policy, and IPLC.



The Agility Lab worked with the Durable Freshwater Protection team to establish a timeline of workshops, empathy interviews, and a design sprint to achieve the team's goal outcomes and develop their next steps for testing and prototype refining.

“The first step was listening to stories and needs from key stakeholders and staff within the organization around the world working on DFP,” Abileah said.

Refocusing on Core Priorities: ‘What Is Getting People Stuck?’

Abell said that the DFP team had come in a bit broader on the question they wanted to address, and The Agility Lab helped them narrow it down. She said she really liked the terminology that Abileah used, which was asking, “What is getting people stuck?”

While the solutions are still a work in progress, the process helped the team recognize the need to invest time and resources in a collective fashion with their colleagues to answer that question and translate the answers into the most useful forms of guidance.

“We're so busy that developing these ideas and the guidance has often been back-burnered for us. We are working so hard on addressing very immediate kinds of concerns and needs,” Abell said. “For me, there was this revelation that we've got to figure out how to rededicate ourselves to getting this done, because it is becoming a stumbling block for our colleagues.”

Abileah helped the team refine the design challenge and research question; develop a research protocol that brought in all the necessary perspectives; and create a clear template to solve the team's design challenge.

This set the next pieces in motion, including a facilitated workshop series, engaging in empathy interviews, designing a survey (and other desk research to better understand the pain points of their stakeholders), and a design sprint to encourage creativity in their solutions.

Based on the team's initial feedback, Shetty said the process really helped create alignment in the team. "It provided the team the time and space to actually explore and refine ideas they had been considering for a while," Shetty said. "And most importantly, we heard that this process of gathering feedback and reflecting helped sharpen the team's focus on their own strategic priorities."

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— RAE ABILEAH, THE AGILITY LAB FACILITATOR



Abell said the process underscored that there was a lack of clarity about the criteria for a project to qualify as durable and that the team needed to do a much better job of communicating that durable freshwater protection is a process, not a checklist with an endpoint.

They also identified key questions related to timeframe and scale, such as when a project can't deal with every threat to a freshwater system or there are aspects outside of a project's control because of its scale.

Abell shared there is enthusiasm to mobilize, because they recognize there is enough expertise to address these questions not just within the DFP team but across TNC.

"We really want to bring that expertise together to help refine these ideas and think about how we can best communicate them out," Abell said. "So certainly something that came out of the process is a real enthusiasm around tapping into the expertise that exists across The Nature Conservancy and seeing how we can mobilize that expertise, either through coaching or through matchmaking, to really help to get projects off the ground."



BUILDING EMPATHY

The purpose of holding Empathy Interviews is to engage with key parties to better understand and center their needs, pain-points, ambitions, and behaviors through conducting empathy interviews. Teams will better understand the challenge at hand in order to support making evidence-based, community-centered decisions.

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One idea is a learning platform, in the form of a Microsoft Teams channel, that allows people to ask questions. Abell said the interviews and surveys conducted as part of the process indicated that though there is a desire for community and exchange, the number of online communications already causes fatigue, so they landed on the Teams channel idea because it was the lowest barrier to entry and everyone at TNC already has access.

DFP recently began trying out the Teams channel and also came away with ideas for various other forms of guidance that would require different levels of resources. These ideas are now being approached with the prototyping mindset encouraged by The Agility Lab — that it's OK to try new things out, see how they do, and then adjust.

“We’ll evaluate it against indicators that we’ve set out for ourselves and decide whether we continue, tweak it, or what have you,” Abell said. “I really like the idea of prototyping and testing whether something is meeting our objectives. I tend to feel like we have to do it all at once and have it all worked out, and it’s nice to have permission to just try things.”

Let's collaborate.

Take two minutes to let us know about your project and we'll be in touch to explore how we might work together.

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