



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

*Conservation in a New Nation:
Inspiring Innovation and Evolution*

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A Workshop for The Nature Conservancy, September 27, 2010

I have a special appreciation for the Nature Conservancy that goes back to when I was eight years old. Over the course of my life, several natural places that were meaningful to me have been paved over for other human uses, but I can go back to the woods at Devils Den in CT, where I roamed as a boy, because of your work. Your mission has shaped my life.

I've had a different career: five years as a political consultant, three years as a photojournalist in Southeast Asia, 15 years as a "deal-maker" conservationist for the Trust for Public Land. In the last eight years I've worked as a teacher and facilitator at the organization I helped to found, Center for Whole Communities, which is now working with over 1,000 alumni, their organizations and communities.

What connects it all from Harlem to remote Nepal to the Rocky Mountain West is that I have been a student of the relationship between people and the land. I care about both. After 25 years in conservation, I simply don't believe that any organization can protect land from a suffering humanity. As a photographer and as a conservationist, I've repeatedly observed that when our lives and culture are suffering, for whatever reasons, that suffering will be made visible on the land itself in the form of dead rivers, damaged atmosphere, destroyed mountains. The pain we feel inside of ourselves as a culture will always manifest itself on the land. This is what it means to be the keystone species. The implications of this are provocative. It suggests that one cannot begin to meaningfully approach loss of biodiversity, destruction of our landscapes, climate change, without also being in direct relationship with the causes of these problems: human poverty, the destructive forces of race, class and privilege, and aspects of the American dream itself. I believe this to be true. Don't worry, I'm not asking you to believe it.

My own opinions are not the point of this workshop, but I do want to share where experience has taken me. I believe that the primary challenge to conservation in America today is this: *how do we embrace a story of conservation that is not solely about biodiversity or science or even the appropriate care of the world's resources, but also about the creation of meaning – the making of lives that are worth living?* When we do this, not only will far more people be

drawn to conservation, but conservation itself will become stronger and more enduring. My work has been to help conservation groups make the long, long journey from their heads to their hearts.

Here are the core questions for this workshop: **What will The Nature Conservancy face in the next fifty years in service to its mission? What will be the evolving face of The Nature Conservancy in that time? How adaptable is the Nature Conservancy today? And to what must it adapt?**

Here's our thesis: No conservation organization, even one as powerful as The Nature Conservancy, will succeed in the mission of preserving biodiversity without a much broader and deeper engagement of the American public. And that American public is experiencing its most significant demographic shift in 125 years. Those organizations that have this view of America in the near future in sight, and have the courage and skill to adapt, are all innovating in broad but recognizable ways toward that community. This isn't a retread of what TNC calls Community Conservation ... "I know you've been there, done that"; it's not about understanding the cultural context and managing the community toward your goals. It's about bravely engaging everything that is different with the utmost trust that this engagement is going to spread your mission, change you to better fit that mission, and do conservation in ways that you haven't yet thought about. It's about being open to the game-changing quality of the next twenty five years, and re-discovering what is high leverage conservation.

Central to this transformation is both 1) your capacity to leverage science, and 2) your capacity to leverage power but also 3) your capacity to leverage difference. We believe these three forces together are your competitive advantage.

For the rest of this workshop, you'll not hear us speak much about diversity but more about difference. For this reason: it's too easy for groups endeavoring to make change to view diversity as being primarily about race. And as a white man, I can share my personal experience that race in America does trump all other forms of difference, but if TNC only sees diversity as being about race, you won't be able to engage the full difference that's in this room and, therefore, you'll not likely come to understand what it will take to transform yourselves.

Why transform TNC? Because the America emerging right now is dramatically different from the America that was merging in 1951 when TNC was born. Here's something of a Harper's Index, 2010, about biodiversity, health of land, health of people.

2050 the internationally accepted date by which every nation has to be carbon neutral in order to avoid catastrophes brought on by climate change

2042 the date by which white Americans are predicted to be a minority in the United States. And this is true now in four states: Hawaii, Texas, California and New Mexico. 40% of all

Americans under the age of 24, right now, are people of color. You know that “diversity thing”; well, it’s already happened. All that matters now is who will and won’t adapt to it.

30% more the increased percentage of liquor stores in low-income zip codes than in higher income zip codes

2:1 the ratio of prisoners to farmers in the US

565 acres the rate per hour that land is developed in the USA

1 in 4 Americans the number annually that suffer enough from clinical depression to land them in a hospital

1 in 3 Americans the number of us who suffer from obesity. For many people of color, inequitable access to healthy food is also a major contributor to health disparities. For example, adult obesity rates are 51% higher for African Americans than whites and 21% higher for Latinos.

How will biodiversity be “protected” in 2042 if kids today don’t know, don’t care?

Is it possible that 110,000 protected areas are truly “protected” from a population that largely doesn’t understand, doesn’t relate, perhaps doesn’t care and, right now, is asking for something different?

To set the context for this workshop, I’m going to share some ideas about: Isolation, Innovation, and Transformation. You certainly won’t agree with everything, some of you may not agree with any of it.

First: **Isolation.**

Because of my respect for your work, I will be as forthright as I can be. You are very successful people. You work exceedingly hard and you do exemplary work, but it alone is *not sufficient*. Even though you are brilliant and strong, you are not strong enough to do the work of conservation in isolation of other movements and other human needs.

First, the challenges to the land and to biodiversity are too complex and far outpace what can be accomplished by laws or buying land.

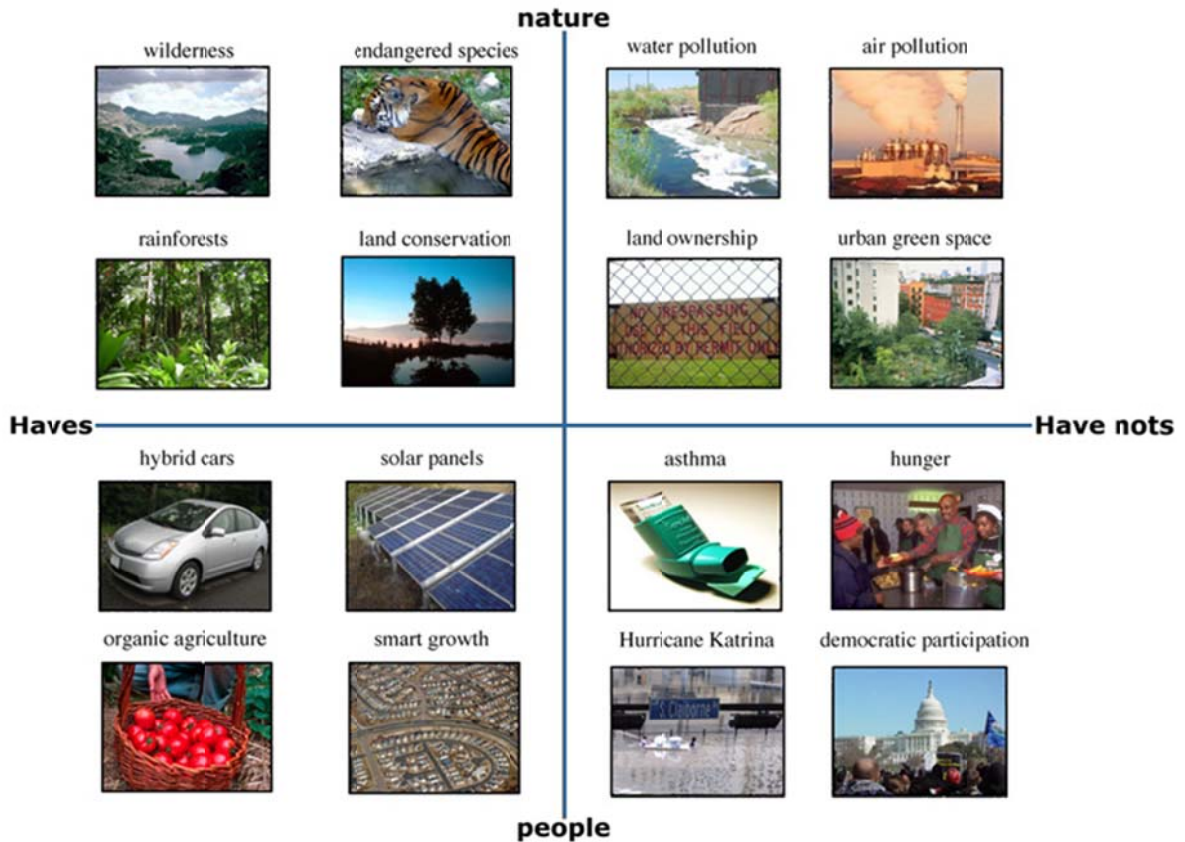
Second, your past successes will be challenged more and more until you can effectively make the case that your mission of healthy land and biodiversity is relevant to someone like this man: Brahm Ahmadi of Oakland who founded Peoples Grocery to bring healthy food to

urban neighborhoods where liquor stores stand in place of grocery stores. Or this woman: LaDonna Redmond of Chicago, who is blending public health, land conservation and food security on the west side. Or Paula Garcia of New Mexico, who is conserving culture through conservation of traditional waterways. They care deeply about land and biodiversity too, but, to be honest, they do not see themselves as conservationists. They don't see themselves in the story of conservation.

What is the impact of this isolation and separation between those who care about protecting people and those who care about protecting nature?

Why does it matter that only 11% of the paid staff of environmental organizations are people of color, or that Outside Magazine, on average, includes 600 photographs per issue of which only 5-10 per issue have been of people of color? There are millions of men and women of color, who believe in the same values of conservation in their daily lives, and even who give their time and energy to environmental organizations, but they do not get paid and they rarely see themselves in the pages of those magazines.

The same divides that play out in our American culture, of course, are mirrored in our movements for change.



We call this the Whole Communities Framework. This is not a map of the way the world should be, but the way we think it is. Frankly, this map should piss you off.

First, there is the divide between those who care about people and those who care about nature. This divide is worsened by the fracture between those who have privilege and those who do not.

If you have financial resources and care about nature, you may be interested in these types of issues: endangered species, acid rain, land conservation.

If you're privileged and focused on people, these very well may be your concerns: alternative energy, fuel-efficient cars, fair trade and organic agriculture.

If you have little privilege and care most about people, perhaps you are interested in public health, structural racism, democratic participation, and hunger.

Lastly, if you have little privilege and care most about nature, you may be interested in clean air, access to parks and urban greening.

Our point is this: all of these concerns are critically important, and none will succeed without the other.

Those who care about endangered species will not make enduring progress without those who care about Katrina. Here's why: without real alliances across the quadrants, conservationists risk being left behind by a changing public that doesn't know them.

That's hard. As a conservationist, I was never trained or equipped to move across this map and create new alliances. Honestly, a lot of my friends in conservation got into conservation because, frankly, they preferred nature to people.

Some are already referring to this call to engage with people and community "mission creep", but I would call it creeping into our mission. Creeping into the future. It's the form of leadership that transforms conservation to continue to be relevant.

Innovation:

Biologically and culturally, difference is the primary source of adaptation, resilience and innovation. Consider this point: every person in this room started off as a single cell and yet today each of us has about 30 trillion cells. Those cells didn't just multiply; they diversified into 254 distinctly different kinds of cells, which led to the tremendous stability of our bodies.

Your body has a constant temperature of 98.6 and a constant PH of 6.8. This diversification also leads to resilience. Your arm gets cut and it heals. Through diversification, we can actually heal ourselves. How miraculous is that?

Difference is also the source of political health and resilience. Hazel and her team have proved this out. People of color are often stronger supporters of conservation than white voters.

Finally, difference is the source of financial resilience. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* has been saying for a decade or more that conservation donors are among the richest, oldest and most white of all environmental donor-bases. I guess you could say that's great while it lasts, but that's not much of a long-term growth strategy. But the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* is reporting now three trends: 1) the wealth transfer from boomers to kids, 2) young entrepreneurs giving strategic dollars, and 3) the entrance of donors of color giving to causes not traditionally associated with "people of color issues."

How accepting of difference is TNC? How much does TNC see difference as the source of its innovation?

Quite aside from The Nature Conservancy, our conservation movement has a disturbing, unspoken history around engaging difference. I'm not proud that never once in my years of working at a national conservation organization was it openly discussed that most of our national parks were created by forcibly removing Native Americans, people of color and poor rural whites. Nor was it ever discussed that significant portions of our national wildlife systems were once owned by African American farmers, who by now have lost almost 90% of their holdings. Nor has it ever consistently been discussed how our nation's history of slavery and abuse of people has contributed directly to a largely segregated conservation movement and many generations of Americans disaffected from the land.

Let's be real with one another here: conservation and biodiversity have benefitted tremendously, in the past and today, from this history and from accumulated wealth of privilege. I believe conservation must address this history through its contemporary work or ... risk never gaining a moral voice.

Concretely, this means the very challenging leadership act of sharing power and influence with the emerging majority so that an inclusive vision might emerge that has the support of far more Americans and has a greater power than what TNC could manifest on its own. Innovation depends on leveraging that diversity, not just managing it or retaining it.

Transformation:

A transformation is happening in our country right now, whether conservationists embrace it or not.

By 2042, white Americans will be a minority in every metropolitan statistical area in the country. It's too easy to say that these changes still won't affect many of the places TNC works. Let's take my part of the world, northern New England, which is on average 96% white, but over the last 10 years the majority of population growth has come from people of

color: in VT 68%, in NH 55%, in Maine 44% of the population growth has been made up of people of color.

These demographic changes need to be celebrated because they bring a tremendous amount to conservation, assuming one is willing and able to see them and meet them.

With this view of a changing America in sight, some conservation groups are innovating beyond Conservation 1.0, or as the critics call it, "exclusionary conservation or Fortress Conservation," toward Conservation 2.0, or what the Australians call "Caring for Country."

Conservation 2.0 is a regional land trust in California collaborating with migrant farm workers to create housing. It's a rural land trust in Colorado providing below-market-priced timber from its protected lands for affordable housing. It's a national conservation organization building a charter school to help keep rural, low-income Hispanic ranchers on their land. Conservation 2.0 is conservationists buying health insurance for loggers to help reduce their economic dependence on cutting trees.

These are conservation groups finding new ways to conserve biodiversity with tools *that arise from community need*, and are proving to be as effective as Conservation 1.0 but at less cost and with greater political return. Strikes me as high-leverage conservation.

The skills of Conservation 1.0 have been technical, financial and legal, and we are deeply indebted to this period in conservation for giving us our systems of national parks, wildlife refuges and conserved land all across the country.

Conservation 2.0 builds upon what was achieved over the last 60 years, and it is predominantly concerned with how, as a nation, we *relate to that land and to one another*. It is more relational than transactional. It is conserving biodiversity by preserving cultural diversity.

Because no property boundary or act of law will survive a public that no longer cares and no longer supports it, conservation must be grounded not just in law statutes, but in the hearts, minds, and every day choices of diverse people. If we really want people to live in harmony with nature, it may not be the best strategy to either kick them out of nature, or to make a story of conservation that they don't see themselves in.

Conservation 2.0 is about conserving land with a new set of tools on a much larger scale; from landscape-scale to *culture-scale*. The skills needed in this practice of conservation include story, dialogue across divides, cultural competency, dismantling racism, political agility and building movements. The opportunities for success in Conservation 2.0 are bigger memberships, greater public understanding, deeper collaborations, more funding, more legislative victories, and the chance to move beyond saving landscapes to creating a land ethic, to actually fulfilling Aldo Leopold's dream for conservation.

Our goal for this workshop is to create the atmosphere of trust and openness where you can consider taking TNC further than it has been able to go before.

What you do ... provide people with a relationship to land and nature is *still* medicine for which most ails our culture. Our healthy relationship to land is the means by which we all generate, re-create, and renew transcendent values such as beauty, responsibility, love and the sacred, on which both ethics and morality depend.

But somehow this important work is criticized for being elitist and the province of just the wealthy. And that hurts.

My generation of conservation has been grounded in business and science and numbers. But the challenges today are not merely legal, financial or scientific. They are cultural and social.

Earlier, I said that this work was about making the long journey from your head to your heart. Those words are borrowed from Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce. Where our head and heart come together is the place of visioning and dreaming, which is hard to do for lots of reasons: like you can't prove it through science.

But the biggest obstacle may be this: most of us have been trained in a form of leadership that critiques more than it creates. And yet what is most compelling in acts of social change are the dreams of a different way of living. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "No social movement can succeed without painting a picture of the future that people want to go toward."

The significance of vision to creating change is enormous, but many contemporary efforts at change have reduced dreams to action plans, strategies and parts per million. May I remind us that Martin Luther King did not say, "I have a plan," He said "I have a dream," and he spoke of his deepest values without offering strategy and tactics about how we might get to his dream. He knew that if he could reach people with a shared story for how they might better live.

I want to go back to one of my first questions, which was posed by bell hooks, the social critic:

"How do we create a culture of belonging that feels empathy for the earth and for one another?"

We're all flying on instruments, trying to carefully observe the terrain even though there's no clear map. I feel pretty sure, however, about one fundamental concept:

The essential skills today are relational, not just transactional.

The great Buddhist teacher and activist Thich Nhat Hanh teaches three virtues of leadership: 1) letting go, 2) love and 3) insight.

These are really challenging virtues to maintain in a world of dominated by theories of change, mission statements, action plans, deliverable outcomes, not even to mention the real and imminent threats of climate change, bio catastrophe, hunger, civil unrest, and poverty.

This workshop is about the forms of leadership that enable us to see things anew, to adapt and to innovate across sectors and differences, to then re-imagine and create a new story about the future of this organization.

Can TNC, in the next 50 years, embrace a story of conservation that is not solely about biodiversity or science or the appropriate care of the world's resources, but also the creation of meaning –the making of lives that we feel are worth living?