

Summary of interviews conducted November 3 – December 26, 2006

Invitation process / pre-retreat

Nomination: As you know, the nomination is a critical ingredient in the invitation – it is, for many, the main impetus for attending a retreat. Only two or three people weren't nominated or didn't already have some kind of relationship or connection with Peter. For the two or three who came without connection, attending was a significant leap of faith. For one of the non-attenders, although time was the main constraint, another hesitation that influenced her final decision not to attend was not knowing anyone. In this case, it might have been helpful to have had a list of attendees (of course, the outcome would have been the same if there were no familiar names). Not having the list and biographies was also mentioned as frustrating to two of the attenders.

Financial assistance: Being offered financial assistance was huge – a number of people could not have thought about attending the retreat without it. One non-attender strongly suggested that the terms of financial assistance be made explicit and upfront from the beginning. For this person, the effort it took to extract information about financial assistance cemented the decision not to attend, as this person felt this dynamic indicated something deeper about the way the organization handles information and power.

Time commitment: Of the four non-attenders I interviewed, time was the main concern for three of them (one couldn't take the time because of family obligations, the other two couldn't spare the time from work). Even among attenders, the *amount* of time required surfaced as a significant issue. While most recognized that it takes a long time to “get to the issues,” six days felt like too much time away from work and family commitments. Some people had to take vacation or unpaid time for work, and for some this represented a financial burden.

Racial representation: Most people knew that in accepting the invitation, they would be one of few, if not the only, people of color at the retreat. This created hesitation for most because, although the expectation was not articulated explicitly, people knew it would mean having to play the role of educator, revealer, and enlightener. Others see this role as their calling and responsibility in life and went to the retreat prepared to play the role.

Whether they went willing to play the role or despite the fact that they would have to, most of the attenders were able to articulate their own personal motives and agendas for attending, which included having contact with the conservation movement first hand, space to reflect on a potential job change, engagement with people who share the values articulated in the invitation, capping off a sabbatical, exposure to new tools and connections that could be shared with a home community, and etc.

Language: A couple of attenders commented on the “conservation” language in the invitation. For these interviewees, conservation refers to the sector of work, as well as the race and class of people in it. One person attended *despite* the language, another attended *because of* it – it was the first time she had received an invitation directly from this community and was curious to learn more about it.

Physical retreat experience

There were some concerns about the physicalness of the experience, but this issue surfaced only when I asked specifically about it, and only in a minority of the interviews. For the most part, concerns about the physical aspects of the retreat were small in the greater scheme of things, or perhaps have become much smaller in retrospect.

Walking: Most people enjoyed the walking. The two people who disliked it attributed their dislike to the structure of the activity rather than the physical exertion required to do it. Another said that although it was a physical challenge having vehicles would have “thrown off” the retreat process. To this interviewee, a more practical solution would have been to have the yurt closer to the other activities. One person had a bad knee and although the hill walking was really hard for her, she liked the walking in general. A number of people mentioned that while they enjoyed the walking, because of the kind of walking required (uphill and rugged), they would never recommend the retreat to certain people even if they knew those people would benefit from other aspects of the retreat.

Camping: The tent cabins were a big hit. Those who had ground tents were, for the most part, fine with them, although there were some complaints about earwigs and the slope. One person noted that going on retreat means rest and relaxation, so it was hard to show up and not be able to get good sleep.

Food: Without exception, everyone loved the food and the presentation of it. A number of people enjoyed the fellowship of shared meals.

On-farm activities: Especially for urban-based people, the opportunity to connect with dirt and animals was significant. On the other hand, some found it contrived and/or insufficient. For some, being on Knoll Farm was actually less an experience of land and nature than they have in their daily lives.

Location: As you know, some people love Vermont and Knoll Farm, some people love it less. Depending on where they were coming from, some found it a totally remote experience, others were struck with the amount of activity and interface with development, others found meaning and poignancy in that very interface. For some, Knoll Farm *makes* the experience, for some it detracts.

One person made a request that more effort be made in understanding the experience of the native peoples who were on the land in the past and in exploring the interface between Knoll Farm and the community now, in the present.

Two people found that, given the issues under consideration, having the retreats at Knoll Farm is a contradiction. They suggested bringing the retreats to less privileged spaces and circumstances – closer to what most people live.

One person had a sense of being set apart, up on the hill, from the rest of the Mad River Valley community. This person suggested that the community be more apparent in and connected to the retreat experience – that CWC explore the ideas of whole communities in the community in which they are located.

Retreat content

Lack of shared context: The majority of people of color who have attended CWC retreats are not from the land conservation sector, and a number expressed frustration at what they sensed was a lack of a context that really engaged them in their own work. Reinforcing the frustration was a perceived assumption that people outside of the conservation sector would fit their experiences into the discourse of land conservation. Examples of how this played out ranged from the readings and references (largely from white conservationists) to the actual content of the dialogues, which often drifted into conservation “shop talk.”

A number of people pointed to the perspective that, at root, class, race, and relationships to power and privilege undergird the conservation sector’s evolution, and the fact that these issues were not addressed head-on was problematic. In one person’s words, it was an elephant in the room. As a result, the focus on land conservation resulted in a sense of disconnection and isolation on the part of some people of color.

While the above conversation is an important one, there was a question about the level of capacity of many of the other (white) retreat participants to engage in it. In the section of the interview that focused on the attendee’s experience of “*Being open to the claims of others,*” interviewees talked about the lack of capacity to do this – that while there might have been sympathy, there was little or no capacity to really engage a dialogue about power, privilege, and oppression.

Structure of time: Some observed a sense of uneasiness and even disapproval with breaking out of the prescribed retreat structure, whether by skipping activities or proposing different ways of doing things. One person mentioned that in some of the retreats, people of color got together informally and this caused a sense of uneasiness among the other participants and CWC staff.

Two interviewees expressed a need for time to play, to break loose from the retreat, to feel independent from it. In particular, these people wanted to go into the town near Knoll Farm to understand more about how the Farm articulates with the people around it. To not have such an option felt parental and against the very purpose of retreat, and for people of color feeling isolated, it felt oppressive and confining. In the end, it may have deepened the sense of isolation.

Structure of the dialogues: One or two interviewees mentioned that they appreciated the structure of the dialogues because it created a space for all to be heard equally in turn. Nearly half made the point that the structure of the dialogues often seemed to be a means (intended or unintended) for limiting discussion, silencing, or excluding. Two habitually quiet people felt the structure reinforced their tendencies to stay quiet and not raise points when they had something to contribute or challenge others when they disagreed. They mentioned their racial identity as possibly complicating and reinforcing this dynamic.

Some spoke extensively about the experience of the structure not including, and in some cases negating, the dissent, conflict, and/or pain that emerged in the dialogues. Others pointed to how it curtailed opportunities to go deep on the important issues (which may have created conflict). Most troubling to one interviewee was the apparent assumption that the silence created by the structure actually meant agreement or buy in, when actually this person experienced it as silencing. Another person talked about an experience of feeling shut down by the structure and the facilitator's use of it when this person shared emotion related to race and was informed that this was not the intended direction of the day's discussion.

In the end, a structure that is experienced as open and allowing by some was experienced as a means for tightly scripting and controlling the dialogue by others, thus exacerbating issues related to power and privilege.

Giving and receiving: A number of people talked about the incredible gifts they received during their week at the retreat – clarity about a work issue; momentum, confidence, and courage to engage in a creative or artistic endeavor; etc. These gifts came mostly from being away from daily life and distractions, the experiences of silence and meditation, and being closer to nature, as opposed to from the content of the retreat dialogues or the other retreat participants. A number of people pointed out that they didn't feel like the retreat expanded them in an intellectual sense.

As mentioned in the section on the *invitation process*, most people of color instinctively knew, even before coming to the retreat, that they would be “giving” in the retreat dialogues and experiences in disproportionate amounts. Once there, a number of attendees mentioned a yearning for more people of color to share the burden and to make the experience less isolating. This desire was expressed by people who were at retreats with three or four other people of color, as well as from people who were the only ones. Another thing that might have made it easier, according to one person, was if CWC had been more up-front about their expectations of people of color vis-à-vis the bridging/education role. Finally, a couple of people felt that, given this expectation, CWC should be prepared to offer compensation. There wasn't consensus on this, however, and some, when asked directly about compensation, said that they wouldn't have wanted it.