



Helping Young Leaders Re-imagine Conservation

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I recognize how my own life has expanded and contracted in direct proportion to my courage, so I want to acknowledge this moment and the courage and humility all of you have expressed in this chance to come together for this retreat. This group looks and feels like the conservation movement I want to be part of.

I've had a different career: five years as a political consultant, three years as a photojournalist in Southeast Asia, fifteen years as a "deal-maker" conservationist for the Trust for Public Land. 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. For the past eight years I've been a teacher and facilitator at Center for Whole Communities, working with over 1,000 alumni, their organizations and communities. I'm a white guy, now pushing 50, who has been part of conservation for 25 years and I hope to share how my own thinking has changed over that time and what I most hope for the future. Here are three ideas that I want to share with you as context for this retreat: Isolation, Transformation, Truth and Reconciliation.

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 by 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 [slides]: 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.

These leaders 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.

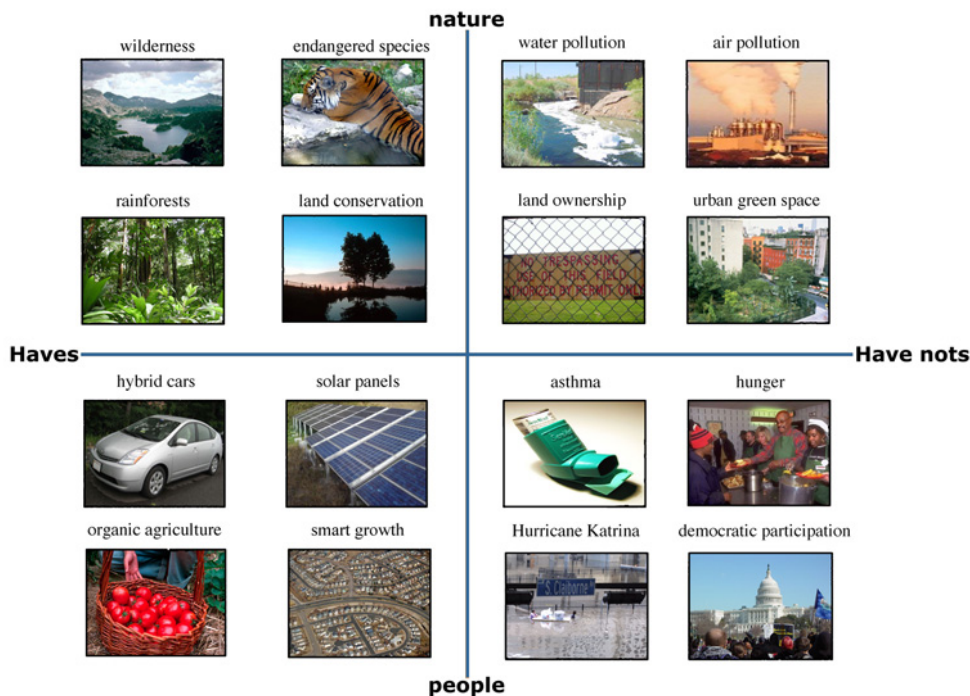
How is it that those of us who care about protecting marginalized people and those who care about protecting the land have ended up today isolated and divided from one another?

Why does it matter that conservation in our country includes far fewer people of color than whites? I'll answer that question directly in a moment, but let me offer a more poetic answer right now. Here are the words of Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry: "The freedom and prosperity of the people can not be seen as separate from the issue of the health of land."

My biggest change in thinking has been on this idea: The health of the land is inseparable from the health of the people.

I have come to accept with great heartache that our conservation movement is a largely segregated movement. We see that at every gathering of conservation in the United States. The same divides that play out in our American culture are, of course, mirrored in our movements for change.

We call this the Whole Communities map. This is not a map of the way the world should be, but the way I think the world is.



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. My generation 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 as "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.

This map should piss you off. One point of this retreat is to learn the leadership skills to transform conservation and do away with these lines.

Here is a quote by Lilla Watson, offered to me by Classie Parker when I visited her at her community garden in Central Harlem: "If you have come here to help me, you're wasting your time, but if your liberation is bound up in my liberation, then let us work together."

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 the United States. And this is true now in four states: Hawaii, Texas, California and New Mexico. 40 percent of all Americans under the age of 24, right now, are people of color.

These demographic changes, should be celebrated, assuming you can adapt with them, because they can positively transform the conservation movement. We should fully embrace these demographic shifts because people of color are stronger supporters of conservation than are white voters are.

According to Fairbanks, Maslin, Maullin and Associates, voters of color are significantly more concerned than white voters about a wide range of conservation issues: global warming, water and air pollution, loss of working farms, loss of habitat for fish. And not only are they more concerned, they're more willing to spend their tax dollars on these issues.

Some conservation groups get this and are already adapting and creating what I call Conservation 2.0. Conservation 2.0 is a regional land trust in California deciding to collaborate 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 them reduce their economic dependence on cutting trees.

The language and skills of Conservation 1.0 have been technical, financial and legal, and its goals have often been grounded in science and in counting bucks and acres as the measure of success. 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 40 years, and it is predominantly concerned with how, as a nation, we *relate to that land and to one another*. My sense of what it takes to "save" land today has dramatically changed.

How we relate to one another – human to human – has a direct and immediate impact on the land. Twenty-five years into this work and I'm convinced that efforts to create a more just and equitable human community are essential to the future of land conservation and deserve as much of our time and money as real estate and laws. And let's be real: no property boundary or act of law will survive a public that no longer cares and no longer supports it. To endure and sustain, the work of conservation must be grounded not just in law statutes, but in the hearts, minds, and every day choices of diverse people. That means that those who love nature need to fully engage people, *all people*. Our work needs to be as relational as it is transactional.

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 version 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.

My goal for this retreat is to create the atmosphere and conditions where you, as the next generation of leaders, can safely take conservation further than my generation was able. 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. My conservation training was to go fast even if it meant going alone, that to save the land is all that matters. But I've come to believe much more so in Dr. King's advice, "If you want to go fast then go alone, but if you want to go far then go together."

Truth and Reconciliation: The other great challenge affecting the land that conservation must transform is our nation's increasing fear of the Other. Call it racism or whatever you want. But I can tell you this: those fastest growing areas in America are also the most segregated. Areas with a more than 6 percent growth rate are overwhelmingly Balkanized racially. The writer Rich Benjamin calls this phenomenon "whitopia." Benjamin says, "what happens is a nation incapable of compromise when people lose touch with those who think and act differently from themselves." This isn't good for democracy and it's not good for the health of our landscapes, and it's one of the reasons 100 years ago that our national parks were created ... to create democratic places where different people could find themselves and one another.

My dream for what conservation can become includes it being a source of truth and reconciliation for our country around our nation's history of land use, race, power and privilege.

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 have lost almost 90 percent of their holdings. Nor has it ever consistently been debated that our nation's history of slavery and abuse of people has contributed directly to a segregated conservation movement and many generations of Americans disaffected from the land.

This week, let's be honest with one another here: Conservation has benefitted tremendously, in the past and today, from this history and from accumulated wealth of privilege. Conservation must address this history through its contemporary work or ... risk losing our moral voice or public standing. Concretely, this means the very difficult 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 community members. Truth and reconciliation means conservation leading the way in restoring land to peoples who have lost it.

What you do as conservationists ... 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.

Your most important work is to offer a new story. Today, you can't demand change, you can only inspire it. And what inspires Americans isn't adequately expressed in facts, and data, and five-year plans. May I remind you that Dr. Martin Luther did not say "I have a plan." No, he said "I have a dream."

I was 8 or 10 when I first heard Dr. King's *I have a Dream* speech. I was living in affluent Fairfield County, Connecticut and I still remember that part of the speech where he says "I have a dream that one day in our nation my four children will be judged not for the color of their skin but for the content of their character."

This week we'll explore together what is our "I have a dream" speech for land and biodiversity and community. Can all Americans see themselves in your story? How is this story relevant to their lives?

I agree with the social critic bell hooks who asks "How do we create a culture of belonging that feels empathy for the earth and for one another?"