



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

Celebrating The Nature Conservancy's 50 Years in Vermont: What to expect in the next 50 years?

Peter Forbes
Shelburne Farms
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What an honor to be with you on this occasion. I haven't met all of you yet, but I feel like I know who you are. You are protectors of the land. The land beckons all humans to her side, and you are among those who have answered yes. Thank you.

And I have a special appreciation for the Nature Conservancy that goes back to when I was eight years old. Think back to when you were eight years old. Think for a moment about the places that most inspired you then as a kid. Go back to that place in your memory. Perhaps it was a park, or the river behind your house, or your grandfather's farm, or a small garden on the corner, or a subway stop. Bring it back for a moment. Smell it again, feel the breeze, hear the sounds of that place. Now, show of hands, how many of you could not go back to that place because it no longer exists?

The place that most inspired me as a kid still exists, thanks to The Nature Conservancy.

Over the course of my life, several places that were meaningful to me have been destroyed for other human uses, but I can go back to the woods at Devil Den in CT, where I roamed as a boy, because of your work. Your mission has shaped my life.

Because of my deep respect for The Nature Conservancy, I will be as forthright as I can be. You are a successful organization because here in VT you've never stopped doing community work.

But the community is changing dramatically even here in Vermont, and as result the nature of your work with communities will need to change and deepen.

Though Vermont's population is 96% white (equivalent to Maine and New Hampshire), 30% of our population growth between 1990 and 2000 was made up of people of color. Vermont has already changed dramatically, but the evidence will not be fully understood until the completion of the 2010 census. But here's some important data points for you to consider:

Today, there are 1,500 undocumented farm workers in Vermont helping to make possible the milk we drink.

Yes, English is the first language for the far majority of Vermonters but, get this, today, 68,000 Vermonters (11% of the population) speak as their first tongue 64 languages other than English.

The Burlington High School's website brags that in its halls more than 20 languages are spoken fluently. Vermont has the highest percentage of speakers of Croatian in the United States.

While other parts of the country have more racial diversity, our diversity here is about socioeconomic and class, and this deeply affects the politics and membership of conservation. Fifty years ago, when TNC got started, the "Vermont way" was that wealth was less conspicuous than today. The ethic was: if you had money, you didn't show it. The goal was to fit in, and share some common values about ways of living. More often than not, haves and have-nots went to the same public schools, swam in the same swimming holes, endured the same winters and mud season, voted face-to-face at the same town meetings.

Today in Vermont, wealth and power --as well as poverty and disenfranchisement- are far more visible than ever in political slogans like take back Vermont and in the statistics of our beloved state.

Vermonters have a very high median household income of \$52,000, but 11% live in poverty (about the same as 1979). **59%** of VT households say they must choose between food and utilities. The gap between haves and have-nots is both growing and becoming more visible.

Vermont is a different place, culturally, than when Jim Marvin and Hub Vogelmann started the Vermont chapter of The Nature Conservancy, and its rate of change is now accelerating.

Because of my deep appreciation of you, I want to explore what the next 50 years for TNC in Vermont might be like.

First some thoughts on what has given me meaning.

This is who I am: Bull Run Farm, Devil's Den, Sages Ravine, Spruce Knob, Dickinson's Reach, Moosilauke, Arun River Valley, Central Harlem, Cedar Mesa, Chama River, Arch Rock, Drake's Beach, Knoll Farm.

That's me. These words, these places, tell my story. These places are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up this body. I'm that alchemy of land, people and story.

The education that most transformed me began for me after college and is best described by this word *querencia*. Show of hands, how many of you have heard of this word?

It's a mestizo word, defined for me by Estavan Arrellano:

"The place where the animal lives, the tendency of humans to return to where they were born, affection, responsibility, the space where one feels secure, the place of one's memories, the tendency to love and be loved."

This word, and many others like it in other languages, suggests that *our affection and responsibility to one another has always been intimately connected to our relationship to place, to land, to nature.*

Querencia is what makes Vermont unique. I believe that our love of land informs our traditional sense of neighborliness and our acceptance of others. Take this in: while across the United States about 1 % of the population farms and there are nearly twice as many prisoners as there are farmers; here in Vermont, 4 % of the population earns their living from the land. In VT, we are more connected to the land than almost any other part of the United States and this contributes directly to our democratic traditions and our strong sense of community.

There have been many who have helped me to understand this relationship between land and community: for example, in my twenties, I worked as a photographer in rural Nepal where time was counted in the cycles of the moon and in the passing of seasons of rain and snow. Their currency was rice and one's labor, and their wealth was the neighbors who would come when something went wrong.

Or my friendship with the great homesteader and social critic, Bill Coperthwaite. Bill's inspiration for his innovative architecture and principles of democracy-in-living come from his love of the land that has sustained his bold experiment in living. There are four miles of Down East Maine coastline and tidal estuary that Bill calls home and this land and he have gently shaped one another in a relationship that's lasted fifty *years*, that's described in the book that he and I collaborated on called A Handmade Life.

Or my alliance with Classie Parker, a third generation resident of 121st street in Central Harlem who took a vacant lots behind her house and turned them into Five Star Garden, a place that grows people and community and relationships as much as it grows tomatoes. It was Classie who said to me on the first occasion that I met her, '*Peter Don't you feel that my Dad's your dad?* Later, when the organization that I worked for –TPL– helped Classie and her neighbors to protect these gardens and 60 others in New York City, Classie said to me: "*If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come here because your liberation is bound up in my liberation then let's work together.*"

Classie, perhaps more than any other teacher, helped me to understand that my work in land conservation was fundamentally about healing relationships and making whole people, whole communities.

What they have helped me to see is this: the fundamental challenge of our time is not climate change, or loss of biodiversity, or hunger; it is this: how do we nurture a culture of belonging and of meaning where we feel empathy for the world and for one another?

The next work of conservation is to connect people to one another and to the earth itself, to create *querencia* and community in what is fast becoming an anti-community world.

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?

If you can do this, not only will far more people be drawn to conservation, but conservation itself will become stronger and more enduring.

The Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan tells us: “What happens to the land and what happens to people is the same thing.” Said another way, when our human 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 individuals and as a culture will always manifest itself on the land. As Wendell Berry has written for decades, “we are the land and the land is us.”

The implications of this are provocative. It suggests that one cannot begin to meaningfully approach loss of biodiversity, destruction of our landscapes, or climate change, without first addressing the true 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.

Some conservation groups get this and are already adapting and creating what we 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 50 years, and it is predominantly concerned with how, as a community, we *relate to that land and to one another*.

How we relate to one another – human to human- has a direct and immediate impact on the land. 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, political agility and movement-building. But 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 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.

But I've come to believe much more so in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s advice, "If you want to go fast then go alone, but if you want to go far then go together." Dr. King said "we cannot walk alone."

Even though The Nature Conservancy is both 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.

For the last eight years, I've been part of another unique Vermont experiment in understanding what it will take for conservation to *not walk alone* or apart from other movements for social and environmental change.

At Center for Whole Communities in the Mad River Valley, we try to create safe places where very different leaders from across the country can dialogue together, understand what is different and what is shared, and create new alliances.

We bring different worlds together. We work very hard to demonstrate the role of land and nature to social justice, and the role of fairness and equity to conservation. Through this work, I have come to understand why sense of place is so closely connected, for many, many Vermonters, to a sense of identity and a sense of justice.

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 we 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 today 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.

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% of all Americans under the age of 24, right now, are people of color.

It's too easy to say this won't happen in Vermont. I believe it's already happening in Vermont, less pronounced along racial lines and more clear with class and socio-economics. Here's a fact: all of the fastest growing areas in America are also the most segregated. Areas with a more than 6% growth rate are all 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 is not good for democracy and is not good for the health of our landscapes, and it is one of the reasons why 100 years ago our national parks were created -- to create democratic places where different people could find themselves and one another.

I believe that conservation, as it might be practiced in Vermont by a great organization like The Nature Conservancy, can turn this tide. Conservation can become a positive force for community-building, an inclusive action that makes land affordable and accessible to all Vermonters, that is concerned with building a culture that values all diversity: human and more than human. In the end, we need to build a culture and an economy around the needs of nature and people. TNC has a huge role to play in that future.

And Vermont may be our nation’s best crucible to prove this is possible. George Perkins Marsh was among the first to describe the problem, and today in Vermont we have hundreds of examples of a positive and possible future, from localvores to the thousands of solar panels springing up like mushrooms, to the health of our natural habitats and working forests, to the appropriate scale of our democracy, to the possibility that every Vermonter, especially a recent immigrant, can have a relationship to the land.

What The Nature Conservancy can 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 providence of just the wealthy. And that hurts.

Your most important work over the next 50 years may be to offer a new story about what nature means to the health of people and our communities. But today, one can’t demand change, one can only inspire it. And what inspires Vermonters isn’t adequately expressed in facts, and data, and five-year plans. May I remind you that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not say “I have a plan.” No, he said “I have a dream.”

What will be your “I have a dream” speech for land and biodiversity and community in Vermont? James Marvin and Hub Vogelmann certainly had a dream for this organization, a dream that enabled it to grow and make very significant contributions to our lives. What new dream needs to take shape? Can all Vermonters see themselves in this dream? How is this story relevant to their lives?

I don’t know the answers, but I do know what the answers sound like

Bald Mountain
Barr Hill
Camel’s Hump
Moose Bog
Little Otter Creek
Black Mountain

Missisquoi Marsh
Long Pond
Haystack Mountain
Eshqua Bog
Green River
Chickering Bog
Shaw Mountain
Dead Creek
The Narrows
Pherrins River
Maidstone bends
Mount Hunger
Great Falls
Nulhagen
Mother Myrick

Thank you for all you do and congratulations on 50 years of success.