

Conservation in an Age of Consequence

By Peter Forbes
At Newport City Hall
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Sit back and listen to these words: 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, Limantour Beach, Knoll Farm.

That's my biography. These words, these places, tell my story. These are the waters, the food, the wood, the dreams, and the memories that literally make up my body. This is my alchemy of land, people, and story. And each of you has your own similar biography.

Our relationship to land, good, bad, and indifferent, is *still the enduring story of our lives* whether we believe it or not. Even in 2006, few forces will have as much affect on the course of our lives, our cities, our communities as the quality of that relationship between soul and soil.

Pause for a second. Think back to when you were 8, 10 and 12 years old. Re-connect with that place that most inspired you as a young person. Perhaps it was your grandparent's farm, or a park, an urban garden, or a pond where you grew up, or a place that you visited just once. Now, show of hands, for how many of you would that place be impossible to find because it simply no longer exists?

Twice, now, I've returned as an adult to the childhood landscapes that most inspired me only to only to find them obliterated.

I remember a magical pond deep in the woods of southwestern Connecticut that I camped along many times as a thirteen year-old. I can still find inside of me the sense of awe and excitement of coming upon this hidden spot and realizing that human hands had created it perhaps a hundred years before. There were giant oaks on either side of a stone dam wide enough, perhaps, to drive a mule and wagon across. There was a gentle rise of

land overlooking this half-acre pond and here my friends and I must have camped a dozen times in the summer of '74. The spot was so special to us that we did what young teenagers will do; we carved our names in the beech trees and called the place "The Kingdom".

I returned on a thanksgiving day twenty-five years later and wandered silently with my daughter for more than an hour through a sub-division, crossing cul-de-sacs back and forth, looking to find my pond. I was sure I was in the right place, but nothing around me was the same. The stream was gone, and the gentle ravine was gone. When I was about to give up and accept that this was no longer a place but now only a memory, I found myself oriented in just the right way so that everything clicked in place and even though the land had been transformed by bull-dozers beyond recognition, my body re-membered. I re-connected with a place that had died.

Across a stretch of pavement and immediately adjacent to a two-car garage was an old beech tree with "the Kingdom" carved in it.

The woods behind Bull Run Farm did not contain any known threatened species of plant or animal, but they did have a profound impact on one little boy's experience of growing up. I was that little boy. I can only remember how that land had helped me explore, learn, and use my imagination. What will it mean for the child who now live where I once grew up, who doesn't have these natural places?

Thanks to Richard Louv, there's a word for it today: nature-deficit disorder. And here's the result: Today, our culture produces more malls than high schools, more prisoners than farmers, and eats up the land with a similar appetite: 250 acres per hour. The ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan tells us that the average American child today can recognize 1,000 corporate logos but can't identify ten plants or animals native to his or her own region.

Tell me, what's the spell we have fallen under to create this world we live in? It's a powerful spell, woven into the 30,000 advertisements that reach our children each year, telling them what to desire and how to love. This spell says that the earth is a warehouse for our use, that nature is inexhaustible, that we have rights to it but no responsibilities, that nothing has value that can't be converted into money. This spell whispers to us hourly that the point of forests is board feet, the point of farms is money, and the point of people is to be consumers.

This spell has fattened our pocketbooks and lengthened our lives, but it has also created a dangerous and deeply unfair world of haves and have-nots, and pathology of disconnection and alienation. It has led directly to the fragmentation of our land, of our communities, of our families, and of our own lives. One piece of evidence is that 25% of all Americans now experience serious clinical depression during their lifetime. And if your family income is over \$150,000 a year, the incidence of anxiety and depression is even higher.

That's what wealth tastes like without some sense of shared humanity and shared relationship to the land.

Let me go further. Many of the exact things that define the healthy human experience are threatened today.

- Our ability to judge between what is real and what is artificial
- Our sense of our spiritual or metaphysical place in the "big picture"
- Our sense of belonging
- Our sense of tolerance/ acceptance of other life

The writer and ecologist, Robert Michael Pyle, coined the phrase "extinction of human experience" in his important book *The Thunder Tree*. He writes:

“People who care conserve; people who don’t know don’t care. *What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known the wren?*”

The child who doesn’t know the wren is the child who is afraid of walking to school, the child who has already begun to feel boundaries surround her. And, of course, this child is a symbol of the disconnection that many Americans feel which is why your work is so critically important.

Those of us who live in the industrial world have become locked into ourselves, into our own human drama. We do not hear the other voices of life. We need a powerful new story to challenge the deeply ingrained lifestyles of our success that has led us to super size everything: our houses, our food, our incomes, our cars, our commutes, our power plants, our appetites for energy.

When the levees broke in New Orleans on September 2, 2005 this country woke up to a disappointing prophecy: we are not wiser, or more civilized, or more humane than our forbears. We woke up to see plainly that our home is a divided and impoverished nation, judged not by our wealth but by those we have willingly left behind.

After Katrina, our sense of home was vandalized. In the face of this, what do we wish for? I think it is this: to be whole again.

What is a whole community? It’s many things, and it starts with people in relationship to one another and to the land.

A whole community is a mosaic of people living their lives in constant awareness and relationship with a healthy place. A whole community knows and cares for its land and water. A whole community can take care of itself, but does not have hard boundaries. In a whole community, people can come and go. A whole community helps newcomers to become native because it needs their new ideas, but it also knows what it stands for and

can communicate those values. A whole community is in constant dialogue, through its streets, markets, commons and workplaces, about what matters most.

Whole communities define wealth by the quality of their neighborliness, by the strength of their institutions, by the resilience of their local economy, and never by what they can hoard. A whole community knows how much is enough.

A whole community is a place where every person can live out their gifts and their responsibilities. A whole community cherishes diversity of all kinds. In a whole community, efficiency, economy and progress are never more important than people or the land.

Why should conservationists care what a whole community is?

Because this is the age of consequence. Every era matters; and certainly one can point to the invention of the steam engine,(1725) the tractor (1854), the first extraction of oil (1892), the first nuclear explosion (1945) or the when the polar ice caps started to melt (1975) as events of great consequence. And they were. But today many of us fully understand that our collective actions, over one hundred years, have made the planet very sick. The Christian Theologian Thomas Berry tells us that we can never be healthy people on a sick planet.

This is our coming of age moment when we walk the ridge between the evident destruction and the emerging creativity of our time.

What if I told you everything we need is already at hand? Would you believe me?

What you do offers a deep cultural therapy. Land is medicine for what most ails us, and we can be medicine for what most ails the land.. Your work reminds people what is rational, what is in balance, what is natural. Your work helps to liberate all of us from this industrial world that we have created.

A planet this beautiful and rich was required to produce all the art, music and technology that we love; humans alone did not create these things. They all emerged from the land and from our human relationship to the land.

The land is still there waiting for us, for all of us. There's no special membership to join, and no required education before you start. It's open to Republicans and Democrats, bankers and farmers, people in business suits and people who can't afford decent clothes. It doesn't care if you're young or old, brown or white.

What we need hasn't gone away, we have.

It's time to return. Our biology is hard-wired to it. We are always seeking its rhythms. The sounds of its heart beat calls to us every moment of every day.

We answer this call when we dance. We answer this call when we stand in front of ocean waves and feel the power and grace. We answer this call whenever we merge our sense of awe with our sense of fairness; when we merge our love of land with our love of people.

Its voice is in the birds. Its care for us is the water that makes up our bodies. Some can taste it in ripe tomatoes, some can feel it in stones polished by the sea, or the kiss of a child. It is the voice of life, it is our intimate experience of moving wind, water and sky.

Some have wonder about what God created, and I have wonder about what nature created. But the wonder is what binds us together. That wonder is what we need. And it's not just there for *some* of us; it's there for **all** of us. To care is not Republican or Democrat, black or white, conservative or radical. To care is simply human.

Land has always been where the healing begins. And, frankly, land has always been where people's blood has been spilt. The very best aspects of the American spirit – our

sense of community, generosity, dependability – came from the traditions of how we lived on the land. The opposite is also true: our intolerance, our capacity for greed and inhumanity has been played out on the land. All of these possibilities are in us, and get written on the land to form our memory and our morality.

In Russian, the word peace, *mir*, also is the word for land. In Hawaiian, the word *Kuleana* means both responsibility and the earth. The opening paragraph of our own Declaration of Independence speaks about our inalienable rights to live within the laws of nature. These ideas about our fundamental human relationship to the land are not the ravings of a religious environmentalist, but the story of the 99.6% of our human history that does not include the industrial age.

Within the land are the essential clues for living a joyful, responsible life today. Our healthy relationship to land is the means by which humans generate, re-create, and renew transcendent values such as community, meaning, beauty, love and the sacred, on which both ethics and morality depend.

Our healthy relationship to land, therefore, is deeply connected to our sense of patriotism, egalitarianism and fairness, and our sense of limits. These values are the foundation of our cultural house. Our relationship to land is the place where we start to build a healthy culture.

To struggle for a healthy relationship with the land through how we live, what we eat, and who we welcome at the table, is transformational because it ultimately *is* about love and healing. It's about relationship. And most people get this, without having to know all the science, because we humans -at our core- are more tuned to relationship than to isolation.

Our relationship to land heals the trauma of our separation, and because of this, begins to address the broken underbelly of our culture.

For the duration of our time left on this earth, the restoration of this relationship is the great work.

This re-pair job is the big one: it is to restore meaning to people's lives, to defeat our shrinking into separateness, our becoming lost to the connections between ourselves and the rest of life. And it's there, just outside these walls, waiting humbly, without judgment, for you.

I see the best and the brightest and they're not going into law or business, they're going forward to the land. They're going into organic farming, and river restoration, and seed saving, and environmental justice, and urban gardening. Put down your laptops and pick up a shovel!

To re-connect with the land sounds, today, too simple and too soft, for today's appetite for "bold" solutions. Well, that's just what the industrial growth society wants you to believe because they know that nothing is more threatening to their centralized, consumerist ideology than people who want a different, more meaningful life.

The most radical thing one can do today is to stay put and really love a place.

This isn't going backwards. This is going forward to the land in a different way.

And lots of Americans are doing it. Almost unbelievably, there are more than 2,000 community-supported farms in this country today when there were almost none just 15 years ago.

The number of farmers markets has grown tenfold in the last decade.

Or what about the more than 1,200 public and private schools that have started their own school gardens and said "no thanks" to the national corporations that make millions by feeding our children and our prisoners.

This desire to re-connect is seen in the growth of local land trusts: more than 1,600 land trusts created over the last twenty.

None of this was probable or even possible twenty-five years ago.

What we do at the Center for Whole Communities is to make these ideas real in the bone and muscle of today's environmental movement. We welcome to Knoll Farm hundreds of very different leaders: urban gardeners, ranchers, wilderness advocates, tribal chiefs, human rights workers, teachers, writers, biologists, to find shared meaning and common courage.

We teach that relationship is as fundamental as places and things, and that the work of conservation ought to be about helping people to live closely and responsibly on the land.

What happens when people and communities lose that relationship with the land? Do the values stay? Can laws protect what's already left the heart? *I think not.* And that's the great misunderstanding of the conservation movement. *Laws can not protect what's already left the heart.* And the political proof of this is that the protections placed on Artic National Wildlife Refuge in 1976 have been challenged repeatedly by a different and competing set of values. Laws will not hold what has left the heart.

And so conservationists must focus on the human heart as much as the land itself. And what the human heart needs and craves today, and has through all through the ages, is relationship and connection to the larger, more meaningful diversity of life.

We teach that you can't demand a different world, you have to inspire it.

We teach that it's possible to look across the divides of our nation and to recognize new allies.

Finally, we teach the power of story: that the world is made up of molecules held together by story.

Stories help us imagine the future differently. Stories create community, they us to see through the eyes of other people, and they open us to the claims of others. We tell stories to cross the borders that separate us from one another.

Story is ultimately about relationship. *The soul of the land becomes the soul of our culture not through information or data alone, but through the metaphor and analogy of story.*

Martin Luther King did not say, “I have a *plan*”. He said I have a *dream*, and he told a series of stories that many American’s easily understood and could identify with. What is today’s “I have a Dream speech” for land conservationists?

The people of India who have been trying to protect the Narmada River have a saying that goes “You can wake someone who is asleep, but you can not wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

Our stories must wake the people who are afraid and pretending to be asleep. And we can best do that through empathy, compassion and love ... not just fear and rational objectivity. We awake people through positive stories of the possibility of living in a different way. Today, we need both alarm and fascination, both atonement and celebration.

The story of our relationship to land is the story of our true wealth: the people, places and creatures in our lives.

There have been many who have helped me to see this: the people with whom I lived 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 homesteader and social critic, Bill Coperthwaite.

Bill's inspiration and strength come from his love of the land that has sustained his bold experiment in living. There are four miles of Down east coastline and tidal estuary that Bill calls home and this land and he have gently shaped one another in a relationship that's lasted *forty years*, in which an enduring quality of care and attention has made him and the wilds inseparable.

In watching how Bill carries the land in his heart and mind, I have learned that the essential purpose of being alive is to be in relationship. I can't say it any other way: In just living his life, Bill has elevated for me what it means to be human. Bill shows us *by his life* that everything you pile up outside your heart is lost. And we desperately need his story, like we need oxygen, to show us the possibilities of another way of living.

Their form of genius is not limited to Maine or Nepal or any rural place and to make this point, let me introduce you to Classie Parker.

Classie's a third generation resident of 121 first street in Central Harlem, New York City. She grew up in the same building off Frederick Douglas Boulevard where her mother was born. Classie didn't aspire to be an activist and didn't have a grand vision about running a community program. She was flipping hamburgers at White Castle and thinking about her mom and dad who were growing old and needed a way to work and be outside. Classie got the radical idea to turn the vacant lot alongside her apartment building into a garden. That was almost ten years ago and today Classie produces food, beauty, tolerance, and a relationship to land for more than 500 families in central Harlem. Five Star Garden is almost absurdly small, just a quarter acre, but for the people of 121st Street—who, for the most part, never leave Harlem—the garden is their own piece of

land to which they have developed a very deep personal attachment. These are Classie's words:

We think of ourselves as farmers, city farmers. Never environmentalists. Don't call me an environmentalist. We love people and plants; we love being with the earth, working with the earth. There is something here in this garden for everyone. And any race, creed, or color . . . now, can you explain that? This is one of the few places in Harlem where they can be free to be themselves. It's hard to put into words what moves people to come in this garden and tell us their life stories, but it happens every day. There's love here. People gonna go where they feel the flow of love.

There is a difference. You come in here and sit down, Peter— don't you feel comfortable with us? Don't you feel you're free to be you? That we're not going to judge you because you're a different color or because you're a male? Do you feel happy here? Do you feel intimidated? Don't you feel like my dad's your dad?

Classie boiled it all down: “Don't you feel like my dad's your dad?” I remember laughing a bit nervously as Classie said this because I wasn't prepared for her candor and hopefulness. I paused just a moment, and then looked up at her father, sitting ten feet across from me with his feet firmly planted on the earth, both hands resting on canes, eighty-seven years old, garden dirt on his face. “Don't you feel like my dad's your dad?”

Passing one another on the street, our eyes might not have met long enough to see one another's humanity. But there on that patch of earth, what we had in common at that moment was profound: it was the soil, that place, the love and hope that Classie held for us, and the awareness that my own pulse beat in his throat.

This is the soul of the land. It is also the soul of our country; the empathetic soul that I believe is there waiting to be spoken to. This is the generosity, patience, respect and inclusiveness that come naturally to many Americans. You know these stories, too, because they are your stories.

Some walls grow higher each year, it's true. But others crumble down. Our healthy relationship to land is what our world desperately needs to resolve, rejoin, render whole and, finally, to reconcile. Classie, and so many others, have shown me the power of the land is to make peace.

A relationship to the land is the way we free ourselves from this culture of isolation to create an alternative culture of meaning and connection.

May we have the courage to meet people, time and time again, where they are. May we have the courage to stay engaged, to speak out, and to make mistakes. May we have the courage to speak regularly with people who frighten us, to suspend our judgments, to be tolerant, to suffer injustice, and to keep going.

This is the way we will translate the soul of this land back into the soul of our country.

Thank you.

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