Re-Imagining the Promise of Conservation
Obligations and Opportunities in the Next Generation
Peter Forbes for Colby College
September 29, 2015

Honor to be with you this evening.

I take this moment quite seriously because you are a serious institution of learning and growth and because these are serious times.

This year, violence on our planet created 60 million refugees: highest point since WWII. Global climate change is affecting our physical home as well all the cultures that live here. In 2015, artic sea ice reached its minimum extent. And presidential candidate Martin O’Malley suggested in July that climate change contributed to the rise of ISIS by creating a mega-drought that destabilized the region, wiped out farmers, drove people to cities, created a humanitarian crisis that helped to birth ISIS. Whether you agree or not with the impacts of climate change, this is indisputable: that all of these very serious problems affect some people far more than others.

I made this photograph recently in New port News, Virginia where I've been working and where the community is already experiencing flooding from sea-rise. There are 32,000 people who live in this community, 77% of whom are African American, and the city- which is majority White- has no evacuation plan.

Here’s my central question: How do we meet our responsibility to manage this place together?” In these times of strife, what transcends and connects? How do we stay in relationship so that there’s a hope for us to make the most important decisions of our generation with wisdom and care?

Today, our nation is having a conversation about the challenge of living together with our differences in skin color and the size of our wallets. History will look back at 2015 as the
year that our police systems –the very systems meant to keep our communities safe – were shown to be doing the opposite. The 2015 cellphone videos of police brutality across America are as powerful to our consciousness as the films of Bull Connor’s police dogs and water cannon were in 1963.

This is the moment we’re in. What is the promise of conservation to these times?

I will take some risks in speaking directly and honestly with you. We need to challenge ourselves morally and intellectually to meet this moment we are in. I will to speak to my generation’s obligation, and I also want to speak to yours.

Let me begin with a story from 150 years ago. 1864 was the bloodiest and costliest year of our civil war. It was one of our nation’s darkest hours, long before the end was in sight. Our nation’s families were divided, about 300,000 had died, our economy in tatters, In the middle of all that, President Abraham Lincoln did something no other president had ever done before: he signed legislation giving very special legal status to a physical place – Yosemite- designating it a place “for public use, resort, and recreation… inalienable for all time.”

What was Lincoln thinking? Was he crazy? Why this huge distraction? Was he looking for some way to forget his troubles, to forget his war?

Yea, I think he was.

This was a decade before Yellowstone became the first official national park (1872) and many decades before we had a National Park Service (1916). I think Lincoln was quite
intentional that in 1864 our divided nation needed a symbol of national unity and hope for something better than our current selves.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the man who designed many of our urban parks and brought democratic ideals of inclusion, community and equality into the vision of our national park system, wrote a report about Yosemite in which he stated "It was during one of our darkest hours, before Sherman had begun his march upon Atlanta or Grant his terrible movement through the Wilderness ...that the people of the Atlantic received the idea of the sublimity of the Yosemite."

Frederick Law Olmsted and President Lincoln believed that in honoring and respecting a place, we might heal and rebuild our nation.

This was the original promise of land conservation: healing and repairing a nation.

Let me say upfront that not everyone agrees with me. I bet most folks who think about the origins of our national parks think of John Muir, not of Lincoln or Olmsted.

Indeed, Muir got most of the ink. He was a popular author with a popular idea of pure, undisturbed nature –what we have come to call Wilderness - that for some was also healing.

For as long as we’ve had a conservation movement in the United States, we’ve had a healthy debate about what conservation means and how to do it better. What is conservation for?

Here’s a parable about the loss that comes with answering that question narrowly. The story goes that John Muir arrived in Glacier Bay, Alaska by canoe with a Presbyterian minister and a Tlingit guide in 1879. Muir was awed by the vast forces at work in this sweeping landscape of mountain, glacier and water. Muir fell in love with Glacier Bay, and he wrote a series of popular articles for the San Francisco Bulletin even before he got back to California. That led directly to the creation of Glacier Bay National Monument in 1925 but also helped to establish the dominant theme of the early conservation movement: keep safe what you find valuable by removing people and other species that may threaten it.
Muir had a powerful vision that served nature well, but his vision was incomplete: he saw the landscape but not the people, nor how the land and the people were connected.

On that first trip to Glacier Bay, as the story goes, Muir purposefully rocked the canoe so that his Tlingit guide wouldn't be able to shoot and harvest a deer. Muir wrote about saving the life of a deer to make clear his values, but today it seems a sad story of two people unable to respect each other's different ways of being in relationship with a place they both needed and loved.

So last year, I met Adam Davis, a young Tlingit community leader from Kake, Alaska, not far from Glacier Bay in southeast Alaska. Adam hadn’t heard that John Muir story before, but shared a painfully similar account from his own experience. In a meeting between conservationists and community catalysts that I facilitated, Adam said: “You wonder why you conservationists haven’t been welcomed here but when you last came you took food off my plate.”

This is called blood memory ... the memory of alienation that is stored in the cells of indigenous people.

Most of our national parks were created by removing native peoples and low-income white people who lived there to be replaced by the ideal of pristine wilderness. For some Americans, our national parks became a story of healing and fulfillment, and for others it became a story of removal and alienation. As we think of the promise of land conservation, we need to be conscious of all the stories.

Where does Maine fit into this American story of conservation? And what is Maine’s doing today that is helping to create a new story of conservation that more Americans can see themselves within?
Certainly, there’s a story here of conservation being about “protecting scenery from a sailboat”, meaning protecting the view of the Maine coast for a very privileged few. Local people could be in that definition of conservation only, I think, if they were quaint and contributed to the scenery. One might say that’s the story of creating Acadia National Park.

But Maine also has several competing conservation stories like the arrival in 1950s of Rachel Carson and her devotion to science and biology and her understanding natural ecosystems. She helped to start The Nature Conservancy.

And then the arrival of Helen and Scott Nearing in 1954, homesteaders on Penobscot bay wrote a book about their experiment in living called The Good Life about self-reliance, simple-living, vegetarianism, deep connection to nature, and social justice. By 1974, that book had sold a million copies and drew thousands of young people to Maine at a moment when Maine’s population was shrinking; many of them stayed and joined conservation commissions and started local land trusts.

The ethic of the Nearings was about working the land with a hoe, living organically for the sake of the earth, and living with less so that others might have more. Their philosophical children are varied and numerous, from best-selling gardening guru Eliot Coleman, to Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, to social critic and homesteader Bill Coperthwaite.

To this Maine lineage of thought, nature is best understood up close and personal with dirt under your fingernails. To this lineage, one’s close connection to nature is a path to social justice because within nature one sees the patterns of life more clearly. Scott Nearing wrote: “realize that you are part of all and responsible to all that goes on around you.”

What did conservation mean to Rachel Carson, Peggy Rockefeller in the 1950’s 60’s? How was that different from what it meant to Helen and Scott Nearing? What does conservation mean today to a 32 year old executive director of a local land trust? It is this rich stew of
ideas, passions and commitments that has created the practice of community conservation in Maine.

Today in Maine, conservation can be about saving wild lands and also be about putting food on people’s plates. Conservation can be about making our human communities more ethical and resilient. More and more, this practice of conservation cares about all forms of extinction: species of life but also ways of life.

Imagine there’s a land trust that does all the traditional conservation you’re familiar with, but also owns and operates a 400 acre working farm, which feeds –year round—700 families, takes food stamps for 1/3 of those families, and is responsible for growing the land trust membership by 300% over the last decade.

Imagine there’s a conservation group that gets 25% of its 1.2 million dollar operating budget from a group of hospitals who believe that its recreational trails and public programming are medicine for their patients.

Imagine there’s a land trust with such a strong public vision for the use of their land that it’s designated by the public school as the lead community partner in helping to educate that community’s young and old.

Imagine there’s a conservation group in a city that operates 30 community gardens, a neighborhood park, and 50 units of equity-capped housing and is part-owner of a food hub that distributes 200 tons of organic produce from the suburbs to families and restaurants in the core city.

Imagine there’s a land trust that has created something new ...a cultural easement over some of their land to a native American tribe who will have legal rights for the first time to a place that has, as long as the grass has grown, had great spiritual and cultural value to them.

Imagine there’s a land trust that gets why some in their community think they are elitist, and in response sells portions of their conserved timberlands to cooperatives of low-income people who needed the firewood and the benefits of land ownership.
Imagine, one day in the future, there might be a consortium of conservation groups that pool their money and their smarts to conserve 20,000 acres while simultaneously co-creating with the community a “rural recovery plan” to endow a local school, do job training, and create a small-business loan fund.

You don’t have to imagine any of this, right? All of that is real. Everything I’ve described is already happening.

Many call this “community conservation,” and think of it as new, but for others it’s as old as time itself. The understanding of the interdependence of human and non-human life is the bedrock for many Native people’s definition of conservation, it’s clearly recognizable in Hispanic traditions of land grants in the American southwest, and 60 years ago it was scientifically defined and lyrically suggested a “land ethic” by Aldo Leopold. All the western systems-thinking of the last 50 years repeats what many Native and some rural White cultures have lived: that an act of repairing, restoring, or protecting nature that doesn’t include people in that nature won’t survive, won’t be durable, won’t last. You can’t put a bell jar down over a piece of land and imagine what you are “protecting” there will thrive.

We are witnessing in Maine a natural evolution of conservation from isolated, narrow objectives like maintaining scenery, protecting recreation, and stopping unwanted development to a bigger picture aspiration to nurture a whole system of life that includes people and the communities we inevitably create. This is not conservation for people, but a practice that consistently puts people within the landscape. And this is not conservation for biodiversity and wildness, but a practice that demands we create the tools and understandings whereby both biodiversity and human well-being prosper together.
Maine has succeeded more than any other place in our country in this experiment to redefine conservation because of its relatively small population, the strong presence of nature in the ocean, mountains, forest and farmland of our state, progressive funders who are simultaneously urging holistic responses, and more than a 100 community-oriented land trusts plus state and national conservation groups. Maine is giving voice and detail to a global shift in conservation.

This shift in Maine – and many other states- from “protecting land and nature” to “connecting people and nature” can be described as an evolution from conservation 1.0 to conservation 2.0, adding value, meaning and resiliency to the past by making it possible for conservation to heal and to repair.

What needs healing in Maine today?

I asked this of Bowdoin economist David Vail and he told me that what needs healing is the divide between people that is perpetuated when the median household income of those who live and work in the north woods is $40,000 and the median household income of those who visit there is $110,000. “It perpetuates an attitude that the people who live there are crypto-servants and not people with great skills and pride.”

The former legislator, Ted Koffman, told me that what needs healing is the “urban/rural divide which sometimes shows up in Maine as a north/south divide, but it’s most profoundly and consistently the divide between haves and have-nots. That divide has created two Maines and there’s a lot of hurt and angst around this. Though we don’t talk about it much and try to be polite with one another, this divide has always shaped the dialogue here.”

Is there a possible role that conservation might play in making smaller the divide between the two Maines? Can conservation visibly and meaningfully address the differences in backgrounds, perspectives and needs of the people of Maine? Can we create a practice of conservation that helps our lives to intersect?
Our world is filled with boundaries between things, and those edges and borders can be helpful in both nature and culture. Sometimes we need boundaries and sometimes creating them in our minds or on the ground really hurts us. For example, between forest and field is a biological source where all mammals thrive. The edge between land and ocean is where all marine life thrives. And in culture, we thrive in edge places like Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn or a farmers market or central park where all kinds of people mix.

One of those defining stories of our era is that, out of fear, again and again, we turn soft borders into hard borders.

A hard border is the triple wall between this nation and Mexico. A hard border is the 50 foot high wall between Israel and Palestine. 100 years from now, they will say “how could they have lived like that?” At the very moment when we needed to come together to address our shared dilemma, we put walls up instead.

Can conservation today be about softening and making more permeable the hard borders between people?

Here’s a new promise of conservation to the people of Maine: Can we create together here a land-based culture that leaves nobody out?

Everywhere today, not just in Maine, it’s becoming harder and harder to talk to one another. From the tenor of our democracies to the messaging of our consumer culture, we are taught to be assertive – to yell rather than to listen, to advocate rather than to dialogue. How do our communities here in Maine learn or practice how to keep talking and to be in
relationship? Do our churches teach it? Do our schools teach it? Do our state houses teach it? Do our town halls or our malls teach it?

Could our forests and our parks, our gardens, our farms, our gorgeous coastline, our rivers, our trail systems be the the inclusive places that welcome everyone and makes it more possible for us to talk together? Could it be on our landscapes here in Maine that we practice how to neighbor well?

I believe so.

This is where conservationists can and must enter our nation’s conversation about the challenge of living together with our differences. If conservation produced widgets, it might not have much to offer that national conversation, but conservation doesn’t produce widgets; it protects nature and “produces” a healthy relationship between nature and people: two essentials to healthy, human society.

Conservation could offer all Mainers a relationship to this place and to one another, conservation can model inclusivity, empathy, neighborliness that are essential to our capacity to sustain difficult conversations about how to live well together in place. Our landscape in Maine can be the place that leaves no one out, that meets the higher human need for relationship, and offer a symbol of unity just as Lincoln and Olmsted hoped for our very first parks.

The question of how to live well together in Maine is heavily shaped by class: the different experiences of life that arise from some having more and others having less. How might conservationists use their power and their privilege and their conservation “product” of relationship-building to bring more Mainers together? Syd Lea, of Grand lake Stream, told me this: “Sometimes the vibe conservationists send out is this: ‘We know a lot and you don’t know as much. We care for the land better than you do. But if we can enter these
conversations with respect there’s a great possibility for a different dialogue. How do you neighbor well?”

Syd Lea is right. What conservation has to offer toward the healing of Two Maines is the example of being powerful and being committed to neighboring well.

No one should get left out of conservation’s goals for shared prosperity and shared relationship to place. David Montague from Down East Lakes Land Trust spoke personally and poignantly to me about this on my visit to Grand Lake Stream. David grew up doing a variety of jobs that depended on a healthy ecosystem: he guided, he hunted, and he cut trees. And he watched as conservation efforts often failed to include people like him. “I saw the people that most often got left out by conservation and I was potentially one of those people. And it didn’t feel good. I came into this job wanting to do a better job of having conservation serve this community.”

Why is this so important to Maine and to our nation?

4 Quadrant map

(Check to see how my leadership talks handle this transition)

"Building from where our lives intersect” may be the unofficial motto of community conservation in Maine. What does it take to do this? How do we honestly observe our own histories –like the history of conservation and the current realities that perpetuate two Maines- and learn to work through them to create something better for the future?

My generation has worked very hard and successfully at conservation 1.0 to create the 1110,000 protected areas across the globe. It is your generation’s obligation to employ those places to foster a new relationships, new ethics, and new culture.

Like Muir, we often saw things narrowly. We created that 4 quadrant map. You will need to think and act holistically, relationally and you will need to destroy that map.

How to do that? I have several ideas for you.
1. My generation of conservationists gave American culture important themes of **restraint and forbearance**. Your generation may need to speak instead of joy, celebration and opportunity in our relationships to the land.

2. **Don’t leave anyone out.** In our efforts to protect places we left too many people wondering “Protect it from me.” Your generations will need to figure out how to say “You are welcome here.” Let’s create a land based culture across Maine that leaves nobody out.

3. Let’s build a conservation movement here in alliance with the cultural and economic needs of the **4 federally recognized tribes.** They are the originally conservationists and our greatest potential allies in bringing different people together.

4. **Know the history and the stories** of peoples’ land loss even as we preach land conservation. I doubt any in this room have had any personal hand in black family land loss in the south, or the removal of Native Americans to create our national parks in the west, or the perpetuation of slavery throughout our nation’s past. But these are real histories that have defined our country’s relationship with the land. **You** may not be connected to those stories, but those who you seek to connect to hold those stories as their blood memory. You become an ally by hearing these stories and accepting them.

5. **Cultivating Self-Awareness.** Many of the most inspiring young and old people I have met share this characteristic: they have found a daily practice that helps to keep them aware and centered. During the long march to defeat the Taft-Hartley Act, Cesar Chavez paused daily to do yoga. Senator Rand Paul has a daily routine of long walks alone to consider issues. President Obama often began his campaign days with two minutes of contemplative silence even surrounded by a staff of 100.

Knowing the science of our earth and knowing the challenges we face is a huge weight to carry on even the strongest shoulders that can easily become anger, despondency, fear and burn-out. Cultivating awareness is the way to re-fill one’s well and, more importantly, how to recognize when we’re not at our best.
6. **Be an edge-walker:** Leadership in conservation, today, is the ability to navigate across boundaries of difference.

Every generation looks back on the ones before it with some version of the question, “How could we have possibly lived that way?” How could dueling have been a respectable way to end disputes? How could we have openly, legally created an economy based upon slavery? It easy to look back and say that, and it’s so much harder to recognize what we are doing today that will be judged as morally bankrupt tomorrow?

That awareness is a kind of competency that arises from our relationships with others. We gain that sort of moral perspective when we are open to the claims of others, not isolated in our own communities of like-mindedness. Our contact with difference is what enables us to innovate and to lead full, meaningful lives.

What does it mean for a life to go well? What does it mean to have a life of significance … a life well lived?

The deeper our relationships with other human beings, the deeper our relationship with a place, the fuller are our answers to those questions.

The Nez Perce leader, Chief Joseph, famously said, “The longest journey a person will ever make is from their head to their heart.” By now you know some of what’s in my head. Pretty scary, eh? I want to also talk about what’s in my heart.

I’m a conservationist and a community-builder, and I’m also I’m youngest son of a Jewish immigrant who came here from poverty and a city in the Ukraine. He arrived with a different name and a different language. This was his first experience of America … but he instilled in me a love of land and wilderness. His “sense of place” is different from my own: he had Brooklyn’s gritty and polluted East River and he gave me a love of the wild. I am
forever privileged by all that he had to do for himself and for me to make a home in America.

His legacy makes it impossible for me to think about place without also thinking about “Place for whom?” And when I think about the promise of land conservation, ....I think of his struggle to be at home in America.

There are many, many thousands of Mainers, and many millions of Americans, who love the land and may now be –or have forever been- at the edges of town or mainstream culture, there by choice or not, but who feel strangers in their own community, left out of economic progress for whatever reason, folks who were here first, or came last, people who work with their hands in a world that works with their heads, or folks simply on the losing end of a demographic trend. It’s not that I hope to do conservation just for them, but I will not do conservation that forgets them. To do so is to forget my father.

In 1950, Scott Nearing wrote, “it takes initiative, it takes gumption, it takes a certain amount of daring to leave the rut and cut out a new path.” Let’s make that new path together. Let’s care for a vigorously healthy natural landscape and never stop working toward giving every Mainer, those who arrived first and those who arrived last, a relationship to this place by building a practice of conservation that arises from where our lives intersect. If we do that, Conservation will have created a culture of well being and a real understanding of what it means to neighbor well.