



# Transforming Conservation for the 21st Century

As a photographer, artist, and conservationist, I have repeatedly observed that when humans are suffering, that suffering will be made visible on the land and in the water. The enormous effects of our behavior make us the ultimate keystone species, and the implications to conservation are provocative. One cannot begin to meaningfully address loss of biological diversity or climate change without addressing human poverty, the destructive forces of the divides among races and classes, and the desire to improve one's quality of life.

I believe that the primary challenge to conservation today is transforming our perspective from one that is primarily about biological diversity or science or even stewardship to one that also is about the making of lives that are worth living. If we do this, not only will far more people be drawn to conservation, but conservation itself will become stronger and more enduring. *Querencia*, a mestizo word, was defined by the Indo-Hispano cultural geographer Estevan Arellano as 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 and similar words in other languages suggest that our affection for and responsibility to one another are intimately connected to our relationship to place, to land and water, to nature.

Central to achieving a transformation of perspective is our capacity to leverage science, our capacity to leverage difference, and our ability to recognize difference as the true power of the 21st century. I use the word *difference* in place of *diversity*. On the basis of my experience as a conservationist, a white man, and a U.S. citizen, I believe that race trumps all other forms of difference, but if conservation professionals in thinking about human society see diversity as only being about race, they will not be able to engage and accept the full set of human differences—gender, class, sexual orientation, political ideology—that can be a factor in the probability of conservation success. Without a broad acceptance of difference, it is unlikely we will come to understand what it will take to transform ourselves.

Why transform conservation? Because the world emerging now is dramatically different from the demographics of the 1950s and 1960s, when modern conserva-

tion was born. I write from the perspective of a dominant gender and culture, and I know how the world is changing. For example, by 2042, my race will be a minority in the United States. Those who are currently in the minority in my country have had far less access to and benefits from healthy land and water, and ultimately this has not been good for biological diversity because inequity will always be a threat to the health of people and the land. How will biological diversity be conserved by the middle of the century if children today do not know and do not care about it? Is it possible that the 110,000 protected areas worldwide can achieve conservation objectives given a population that largely does not understand or relate to biological diversity, perhaps does not care about it, and, right now, is asking for a higher quality of life? Ideas about isolation, innovation, and transformation have helped me consider how conservation perspectives can change and can align more closely with other movements and other human needs.

## Isolation

Challenges to conservation of biological diversity cannot be countered by legislation or the purchase of land. We must effectively make the case to society that our mission is relevant, for example, to someone like Brahm Ahmadi, who founded Peoples Grocery to bring healthy food to urban neighborhoods in Oakland, California, where liquor stores stand in place of grocery stores; like LaDonna Redmond, who is blending public health, land conservation, and food security in her neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois; or like Paula Garcia, who is conserving culture and biological diversity through conservation of traditional waterways in New Mexico. These people care deeply about biological diversity, but they do not yet see themselves as part of the conservation story.

Most western organizations and institutions are isolated from one another by their fundamental orientation toward either nature or people and by their relative economic status. My experience is that conservation supporters overwhelmingly have power and privilege. But that power and privilege will become useless if it is

not used in alliance with other movements for change and without working with reciprocity toward larger social objectives. Without real alliances with those working to alleviate poverty, starvation, social injustice, and other social concerns, conservationists risk alienation from a changing public that does not know them.

The past and fear of one another hinder us from transforming the situation. Conservation organizations often choose not to engage in work outside their specialties because they think it is not their mission. This is a surprising attitude for a movement based on the principle that everything is connected to everything else. The unintended consequence of this fragmentation is the loss of our movement's compelling voice and therefore its ability to reach many more people. The future success of conservation depends on integrated, collective action from many disparate sectors. And it depends on captivating a public now who will become the engaged public in 2042 that cares about and understands the connection between health of lands and waters and health of their families.

### Innovation

Biological and cultural diversity is the primary source of adaptation and innovation. Innovation in the protection of biological diversity will not arise only through our knowledge of natural science, but primarily through our engagement of people today and in the future. Innovation will arise as we balance privileged and indigenous ways of knowing. No conservation organization will succeed in the future without a much broader and deeper engagement of the diverse cultures around it. Difference is also the source of political health and resilience. In the United States, we now know from many political opinion surveys that people of color are often stronger supporters of conservation than white voters.

Difference also is a source of financial resilience. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* has been reporting for a decade or more that conservation donors worldwide are among the richest, oldest, and most white (the dominant racial group in my country) of all environmental donor bases. Continuing to primarily target this group of donors is not much of a long-term growth strategy. But the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* also reports three trends: wealth transfer from baby boomers to their children, young entrepreneurs investing in change, and the entry of racial minorities as donors to causes not traditionally associated with social justice.

I hope that the conservation movement can gracefully demonstrate its full awareness that the movement has had a bad track record of engaging difference. For example, I am not proud that never once in my years of working at a national (U.S.) 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 large portions of our national wildlife refuge system were once owned by African American farmers, who lost almost 90% of their holdings in the formation of this system. Nor has it ever been discussed regularly how our nation's history of slavery and abuse of people has contributed directly to a largely segregated conservation movement and many generations of Americans disaffected from the land.

Past and present conservation efforts have benefitted tremendously from accumulated wealth, power, and privilege. Conservation must address this history through its contemporary work or risk never gaining a moral voice or being able to connect and ally with other social movements. This is a call to match our knowledge of science with an awareness of history and to match our capacity to provide answers with our willingness to listen to others. Our knowledge needs to be met by our humility. The most challenging act of leadership today is sharing power and influence with the emerging majority so that an inclusive vision might emerge that has the support of far more people and has a greater power than has been manifested for conservation ever before.

### Transformation

According to the 100 People Project ([www.100people.org](http://www.100people.org)), if the world were made up of 100 people, 50 would be female, and 50 would be male. There would be 20 children and 80 adults, 14 of whom would be 65 or older. There would be 61 Asians, 12 Europeans, 13 Africans, and 14 people from the Western Hemisphere. There would be 31 Christians, 21 Muslims, 14 Hindus, 6 Buddhists, 12 people who practice other religions, and 16 people who would not be aligned with a religion. Seventeen would speak a Chinese dialect, 8 Hindustani, 8 English, 7 Spanish, 4 Arabic, and 4 Russian, and 52 people would speak other languages. Eighteen would not be able to read and write. One would have a college education, and one would own a computer. Only 75 people would have a steady supply of food and a place to take shelter. One would be dying of starvation, 17 would be undernourished, and 15 would be overweight. Seventeen people would not have safe access to clean drinking water.

What is the message of conservation professionals to this world of one billion or so white people and five billion people of other races that they will find compelling? What is the story of conservation biology that more of this planet can hear and embrace as their story? The ability of story and vision to create change is enormous, although most contemporary, western efforts have reduced vision and dreams to action plans, strategies, and tactics. Martin

Luther King did not say, "I have a plan." He said, "I have a dream," and he changed a diverse nation by painting a positive picture of what he thought the United States could become. What is the conservation movement's vision and dream for our global village that will offer us meaning and keep us healthy and safe?

I believe that the demographic changes sweeping the globe are to be celebrated. Understanding these changes, some conservation groups are moving beyond Conservation 1.0 (i.e., exclusionary conservation or fortress conservation) toward Conservation 2.0 (what Australians call caring for country). Conservation 2.0 is manifest, for example, in a regional land trust collaborating with migrant farm workers to build affordable housing by providing below-market-priced timber from its protected lands and in a national conservation organization building a charter school to help keep rural, low-income ranchers on their land. Conservation 2.0 is also manifest in a program through which loggers are provided with health insurance to help reduce their economic dependence on cutting trees.

Conservation groups are finding new ways to conserve biological diversity with tools that arise from community need and are cheaper and have greater political returns than tools they used in the past. The tools of Conservation 1.0 have been technical, financial, and legal, and we are deeply indebted to those who contributed to conservation efforts during this period for giving us systems of protected areas. Conservation 2.0 builds on

what was achieved over the last 60 years and is primarily concerned with how humans relate to, rather than conduct transactions with, protected areas and each other. It is conserving biological diversity by conserving cultural diversity.

Because no property boundary or act of law will survive a public that no longer supports it, conservation must be grounded in the hearts, minds, and everyday choices of all people. If we really want people to live in harmony with nature, we should not kick them out of nature or tell a story of conservation in which they have no place. The skills needed for the contemporary practice of conservation include storytelling, creating dialogue across divides, cultural competency, dismantling racism, political agility, and building movements. The opportunities for success in Conservation 2.0 are larger public memberships, greater public understanding of conservation issues, deeper collaborations and innovations across disciplines, more funding, more legislative victories, and the chance to instill a conservation ethic in more people in a world that has more shopping malls than high schools. We have an opportunity to realize a grand dream with diverse heroes that calls on that part of ourselves that connects with every other living being.

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