

# 2042 TODAY

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CULTIVATING  
CONSERVATION LEADERS  
OF THE FUTURE  
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**BY** Helen Whybrow

The light is still strong as the long summer evening approaches, but many of the 19 people gathered under the orientation tent begin to pull on sweaters as the temperature drops. For some of them, from the arid West or as far away as Hawai'i, the Vermont mountain air feels damp and cool.

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What these young people have in common is their work in the conservation field, and the fact that they are all leaders under 35—some executive directors of small land trusts, others working for state agencies or larger conservation groups. Looking around the circle it is clear that they come from many cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For most of them, this is the first time they have been in a group of conservationists where people of color are the majority.

This gathering of young conservation leaders at Knoll Farm in early July 2010, called 2042 Today: Young Leaders Re-imagining Conservation, was the first core program of an ongoing collaboration between Center for Whole Communities (CWC) and Center for Diversity & the Environment

(CDE). More and more conservationists are thinking about the significance of the date 2042, the time when demographers predict that every metropolitan statistical area will be predominantly people of color, and when the current leaders of the movement will have retired. The goal of the 2042 Today leadership initiative is to help the conservation movement respond to changes in demographics and land use patterns by understanding what kind of innovation and new leadership tools are required. The program specifically equips young conservation leaders with the skills to engage difference of all kinds, to build collaborations across sectors, and to re-imagine the future of conservation in a changing world.



Peter Forbes, co-founder of CWC, describes how the “single greatest shift” in his own thinking as a career-long conservationist was to understand how land and conservation are inextricably tied to issues of race, power and privilege in this country, and that if conservation groups want to innovate, endure and grow, they have to engage difference. CDE’s founder and executive director, Marcelo Bonta, who co-creates and co-facilitates the program with CWC, adds: “Not only is diversity key, I was drawn to the program’s focus on young leaders—those who will be guiding the movement in mid-century—and moved to be of service to them, providing what tools and knowledge we can to help with their leadership development.”

### Program Elements

The curriculum for the week-long retreat was designed to explore the practical skills leaders need to engage diverse communities, to reveal some of the challenges young leaders face in the movement, and to envision cross-cutting social and environmental projects and the new tools they require to be implemented. One of these tools is the practice of story—how we tell

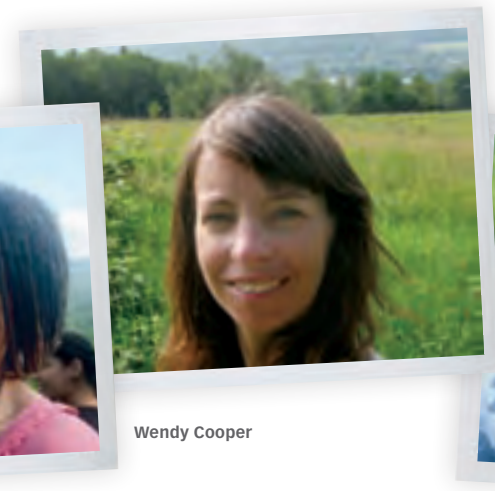
our story and to whom being a powerful shaper of how we do our work. For example, people of color have a very different sense of the history of the movement than do white conservationists, and their version has been largely left out of the story. One exercise, designed to bring all of those stories into sharper focus, had the group divide into caucuses—whites and people of color—and to tell the history of the movement as they knew it.

When the groups came back together, the difference in perspectives was vast: The history of the conservation movement told through the eyes of people of color began much farther back in time, and told a story of loss as well as preservation. They spoke of oppression and the struggles and triumphs of their ancestors, and of connections to the land spanning thousands of years. Not only were the histories different, but the sense of founding members of the movement and the definition of “heroes” was very different as well.

When such different viewpoints are shared, there is always the risk of division or misunderstanding. Because of this, every part of the retreat was also about establishing trust, respect, safety and deep relationship.



Carolyn Finney



Wendy Cooper

Carolyn Finney, a member of CWC's faculty and a professor at UC-Berkeley whose research explores the African American experience with land and within the environmental movement, was another facilitator. She felt one of the most valuable outcomes was that it gave the participants the chance to step back and grasp a much larger perspective. "This was an opportunity for them to explore their job and their work. It's not your job but your work in the world that ultimately drives you, and so how your idealism gets connected to your practice, to the practical job that you do, was a key question for them," Carolyn explains. "I felt like we helped the participants get a sense of their own power and skills."

Along with the practices of story and dialogue, the retreat participants learned about contemplative practice from Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey, the fourth facilitator of the retreat. For some, such as Wendy Cooper, executive director of the Georgian Bay Land Trust, this was vital to their ability to listen to themselves and others. "The group of people that were part of the retreat...gave me the strength to leave my comfort zone and move forward in a confident way," says Wendy.

### New Directions

Jazmin Varela came to the 2042 retreat from the North Carolina office of The Conservation Fund. "I often think about my retreat experience. At work, a lot of what I do is technical. But I

find myself looking at maps differently; they're not so dry now, they tell a story." Jazmin has started a project that is an example of both an innovative collaboration between different groups and of a role that conservation groups might play in social healing. Through a partnership between The Conservation Fund and the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation in South Carolina, Jazmin is helping to map and identify

the owners of the thousands of heirs' properties in Coastal South Carolina.

Heirs' properties are lands held in common; these lands were often secured or bought by freed slaves after the Civil War. With each generation, all living family members own the land in common, though often do not agree on how the land is to be divided. Since these lands have no clear title, and because all the owners may be hard for a family to identify, it can prove difficult for the owners to manage and steward their land. Heirs' properties are particularly vulnerable within the legal system and are part of the reason behind the scale of black land loss in this country. Mapping these properties is a first step in identifying the families and providing legal help. The 2042 retreat helped Jazmin see her mapping work for the first time as a powerful service of telling a story about land and the history of discrimination that has been largely invisible.

Justin Freiberg had just graduated from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies when he came to the 2042 Today retreat. The experience fueled his fire to harness the capacities and skills of people in his local neighborhood—a disadvantaged and underserved part of New Haven—to meet social and environmental needs. He has begun working with an urban land trust and another small nonprofit to form the Urban Foodshed Collaborative. Their first project was to empower

## Numbers & Sense

Check out CDE's website, [www.environmentaldiversity.org](http://www.environmentaldiversity.org), for interesting figures like these, and for information on an Equity Audit for your organization.

- People of color in the U.S.: over 111 million (36.3% of the population)\*\*
- The year people of color will be over 50% of the U.S. population: 2042\*\*
- People of color working for natural resource organizations: 11% of the staff and 9% of board members\*
- Percentage of environmental institutions with no people of color on staff: 33% of environmental organizations and 22% of government agencies\*\*\*

\* Natural Resources Council of America

\*\*U.S. Census Bureau

\*\*\* Minority Environmental Leadership Development Initiative



Ryan Owens and Justin Freiberg



Jazmin Varela

## If conservation groups want to innovate, endure and grow, they have to engage difference.

and train local teens to grow greens on vacant lots around the city and sell them in their own neighborhoods.

“For me,” Justin recalled, “the retreat emphasized the need to keep inclusion and invitation at the core. It helped me to think about how I might build a more diverse coalition around my ideas. It also made me drill down further and re-find and reassess my passion for rebuilding urban soils,” a passion he has since given form in an ambitious entrepreneurial project called “Encendia Biochar.” Biochar is a charcoal-like substance used as a soil enhancer that is made from organic waste streams in New Haven. The program will provide jobs in a part of the city with high unemployment.

Ryan Owens, executive director of the Monadnock Conservancy in New Hampshire, found that he was returning to a land trust where, at least initially, the change he could make was less about new work than about how he approached the work he had been doing before. “Since the retreat, I conduct old projects in new ways: I now ask, ‘who will benefit from this and who will be hurt by this?’ in all instances. I also take on different types of initiatives—I celebrate traditional land values instead of dismiss them,” says Ryan. Other fellows from the program echoed this feeling, including Wendy: “I have a new perspective on how my work affects people, both those who are engaged and actively included,

but more importantly, those who are not, and I take longer to think about why, and then how to change that.”

### Impact on the Future

The 2042 Today program for 2011 filled easily and support for the initiative is growing, with over three times as many nominees for the program as in 2010. Ginny McGinn, executive director of Center for Whole Communities, sees the partnership with Center for Diversity & the Environment as a model for what they are asking of the fellows of the program: “As we are asking the movement to do its work in different ways, we are doing the same, collaborating with a thinking partner with a different approach and different expertise, taking the time to understand and be inclusive of each other’s ideas. It’s one thing to talk about relationship building; quite another to work within it to create something new.”

Going forward, both organizations stress the importance of having strong support mechanisms in place for young leaders as part the program. As a partnership they are developing ways to keep implementing the ideas and practices for the fellows even after the retreat, to be in touch with the challenges these young people are facing and to help them continue the learning.

Each of the retreat facilitators has played a role in mentoring or being a resource for members of the retreat. Carolyn Finney has brought one fellow,

Ernesto Pepito, into her work on the Relevancy Committee for the National Park Service, which advised the park service on engaging a more diverse population. Marcelo Bonta and CDE worked with Monica Smiley to do an Equity Audit of her organization, Tualatin Riverkeepers, and provided a spot for her in CDE’s Environment 2042 Leadership Program, which targets top leaders in the environmental and social justice movements.

Peter Forbes has helped many young leaders navigate conflicts they feel about being in an organization where the methods and ideals no longer match their own. This is particularly important in this time when there is a changing of the guard, and new and old generations often see things very differently. Marcelo Bonta remarks, “When young people enter many conservation organizations there can be a big gap in cultural competency and this can be a challenge. They tend to experience a sense of isolation and find it hard to bring their full self and to be successful.”

How will the conservation movement nurture and hold onto those who will lead it in the future, even when their ideas may seem foreign or threatening to the mission? This is a question many within the movement are asking, and huge shifts are underway to lead conservation into the future as a relevant force for environmental and social change. 🌱

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