

# ESSAY **FOUR**

BY Peter Forbes

## A NEW VISION FOR CONSERVATION

**I have tried to be a consistent student of the relationship between people and the land.** I've learned that conservation is much more than buying and protecting real estate; it's the epic story of nurturing a healthy relationship between people, and between people and the land.

Here are the questions that I'm grappling with:

- What will conservationists face in the next 25 years in service to their mission?
- What will it take to innovate in the future in the way we have in the past?
- What are we for, and what kind of leaders does that ask us to be?

These questions imply the need for a change of some sort. Why? Hasn't conservation been enormously successful?

It's that success that makes change necessary. When conservationists control 4 million of 20 million acres, or about 20% of a state's landmass, as in Maine, it is no longer feasible to say that transportation, poverty, food security or how your neighbors will heat their homes is not your concern. The more you succeed, all those things that you think lie beyond your mission statement become expected of you. That's what it means to be a respected public citizen; it's the commitment to think about and act upon issues that go beyond your own house.

Change is also necessary because the [United States] that's emerging now will be very different from what it was, say, in 1970, when the contemporary conservation movement got its start. In the year 2042, white Americans will be a minority in the United States. Right now, 40% of all Americans under the age of 24 are people of color. You know that "diversity thing"? It's already happened. All that matters now is who will and who won't adapt. [See infographic on page 21.]

The following is excerpted from a speech presented on April 29, 2012 at the Maine Land Conservation Conference. See the entire speech at [www.lta.org/savingland](http://www.lta.org/savingland).

Over the last decade, I've had the privilege to work closely with about 50 conservation organizations of all ages and sizes, and the organization I cofounded has about 750 alumni who are conservation professionals. This is what I've observed about how conservationists are meeting these issues. Typically, there are two camps:

The first tends to understand the demographic shifts internally: *"All my major donors have white hair; who's going to pay for this work in 10 years?"* Their practical focus is on time: How can we buy and protect as much land while there's still money and public support to do so?

*You know that "diversity thing"? It's already happened. All that matters now is who will and who won't adapt.*

Their innovations are around speed, doing more and staying the course. Their advantage is that their tools and strategies are well established.

The other camp tends to understand the demographics externally: *"Frankly, we don't really know who will live in this community in 15 years and what they will need but we'll find out."* Their practical focus is on community relationships and public education. Their innovations are around flexibility and community responsiveness. They lack easily quantified measures of success, and there is no map yet for the terrain they are entering.

And, of course, there are some conservation groups who are successfully doing the work of both camps.



On these topics, I'm neither judgmental nor impartial. Every conservation group has the wisdom to decide what's best for them, for their landscape and for the people they serve. Each camp does courageous, important work in service to the land.

And the presence of these different visions for what is "high-leverage conservation" of the future makes it pretty evident that we are at a crossroads—a critical moment of transition for our movement as we reconsider how best to help conservation thrive.

I describe this as the shift from Conservation 1.0 to 2.0. This is what I see as our biggest challenge, and I honor that we may not completely agree.

No conservation organization, not even ones as creative and successful as those here today, will succeed long-term in the mission of conserving land without a broader and deeper engagement of the American public. And that American public is experiencing its most significant

demographic shift in 150 years. Given what I've observed in current politics, and what nine men and women sitting on the Supreme Court can change, I don't think that laws alone will sustain conservation. I see [all the protected land across the country] as vulnerable to a culture that increasingly doesn't understand, doesn't relate, perhaps doesn't care and, in the future, might ask for something different. To endure and sustain, conservation must be grounded not just in law, but in the hearts, minds and everyday 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.

Many conservation groups are actively creating Conservation 2.0.

Conservation 2.0 is a regional land trust in California collaborating with farm workers and farm owners to create housing and protect farmland. In Massachusetts, it's a land trust merging with a citywide urban gardening

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On a Conservation Trust for North Carolina hike in Western North Carolina, Robyn Hicks discovers bear scratches on a tree trunk. CTNC's groundbreaking Conservation and Diversity Project aims "to make our impact on North Carolina's communities more relevant to their needs, and our advocates a better reflection of the state we love."



MARGARET LILLARD, CTNC

association to better serve the full range of experiences of the land. In New Mexico, it's a land trust operating a mobile slaughtering unit to help expand the farm economy. In Arizona, it's a national conservation organization building a charter school to help keep multigenerational Hispanic ranchers on their land. In Rhode Island, it's a watershed group making critical low-interest loans to start-up businesses who seek to get people on the river. In Oregon, it's conservationists buying health insurance for loggers to help them reduce their economic dependence on cutting trees. In Vermont, it's the land trust reselling protected forestland to cooperatives of low-income Vermonters so that they can participate in conservation and rising property values.

The language and skills of 1.0 have been technical, financial and legal, and its goals have been grounded in science and in counting bucks and acres as the measure of success. Everyone is deeply indebted to this period in conservation for giving us our systems of parks, but also for exporting the idea of conservation to the rest of the world.

Conservation 2.0 builds upon what was achieved, takes in what we've learned about conservation from the rest of the world, and is predominantly concerned with how we, as a community, *relate to that land and to one another*.

Conservation 2.0 is about conserving land with a new set of tools—not limited to easements and even ownership of land—that has the potential to conserve that land on a much larger scale, from landscape-scale to *culture-scale*. The skills needed in this practice of conservation include flexibility, listening, political agility, dialogue across divides and cultural competency. But the opportunities for success are greater public understanding, deeper collaborations and more legislative victories.

For those conservation groups who are breaking new trails, there are some similar experiences. Many are debating the impact of a dollar spent on protecting land versus the impact of a dollar spent on education and getting people on the land. Some are transitioning their stewardship programs into public education programs. Those who are staffing their new education programs are beginning to recognize more ways beyond science and scenery that people want to engage in the land: art, music, food, children's health, spirituality.

As every conservation group engages the community more deeply, they face the difficult challenge of navigating differences. [Those differences can include race, age or class divisions]; a lack of shared language; and impressions on both sides of being left out. This is hard work requiring new skills, but it is the work of our time.

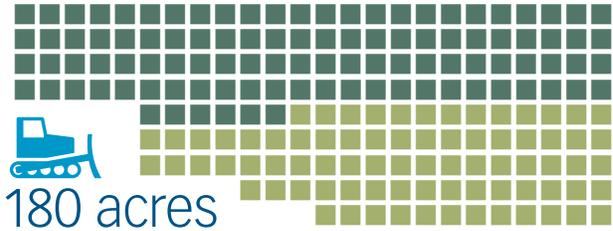
# The Emerging United States



2042

The year that the biggest

demographic shift in our country in 150 years will occur. The year, statistically speaking, when white Americans will be a minority in the United States. This is true now in four states: Hawaii, Texas, California and New Mexico. Right now, 40% of all Americans under the age of 24 are people of color.



180 acres

The rate per hour that land is developed in the U.S.



23.5 million

Number of Americans who lack access to a supermarket within one mile of their home. There are four times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods compared to predominantly black neighborhoods.

And it takes endurance and the willingness to be vulnerable and to make mistakes, but there are conservation groups that are emerging from all the effort stronger, more connected, more resilient, with far broader bases of support.

They are embracing *a new story of conservation that is not solely about biodiversity or science or even the appropriate care of resources, but also about the creation of meaning—the making of lives that are worth living.* When we do this, not only will far more people be drawn to conservation, but conservation itself will become stronger and more enduring.

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 also cultural and social.

On this I hope to be clear. It doesn't mean better managing the community toward your goals. It's about bravely engaging the community—and engaging what's different from you in your community—with the utmost trust that this relationship is going to lead to conservation you hadn't thought of, spread your mission, even change you to better fit that mission.

There are millions of Americans who love the land but who feel like 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.

Your most important work over the next 25 years may be to offer a new story about what nature means to the health of people. I don't think we can do this by demanding a change in attitudes, but only by inspiring it. And what inspires people isn't adequately expressed in facts and data and five-year plans. Dr. Martin Luther King 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 the place where you work?

What new dream needs to take shape?

Who needs to be alongside you to create this dream?

And can all people in your community see themselves in it? 

**PETER FORBES** IS A FARMER, CONSERVATIONIST, WRITER, ARTIST, SPEAKER AND FACILITATOR. A STUDENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAND AND PEOPLE, HE'S WORKED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD TO RECORD AND PROTECT OUR HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LAND. HE CO-FOUNDED THE CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES AFTER 18 YEARS LEADING CONSERVATION PROJECTS FOR THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND.