

**Lewis Creek Association's  
Annual Meeting 2014 - Protecting Our Water Commons: A Conversation**

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**CLEAN WATER: The Premier Forest Product!**

Thanks to the LCA!

Vermont's forests retain a remarkable potential to produce the highest quality water of any land use. Clean water is the premier product of a healthy, resilient, temperate, rainforest. Healthy, resilient forests can best weather the gully-washing storm events of a rapidly changing climate. That is what rain forests do! Conserving our water commons is at the root of ecologically sustainable forestry, resilient forests, and flood-resistant landscapes in the face of the peak flows of a changing climate.

Today I would like to briefly explore these three questions:

1. What is the commons and who are the commoners?
2. What is conservation and why should our water commons now be its primary focus?
3. Given the predicted storm events of a rapidly changing climate, what more can be done on less to protect our water commons?

1. What is the commons and who are the commoners?

Aristotle recognized three types of interests or things. Public things. Private things. Commonly-held things.

In 1609 Samuel de Champlain paddled up *Bitawbagok* – so named by the Western Abenakis as “the lake between”. He looked at the temperate, rain-forested mountains to his east and exclaimed “Voila Verde Monts!”

The pulsatingly-green, verdant mountains that marked the eastern edge of the lush catchment were made so by a combination of carbon-rich soils, ample rain, a wind-based disturbance regime, and a lightly-peopled landscape that had been held as sacred for over 10,000 years.

At that time the land was unenclosed and it included the air, the waters, the soils, the plants, and the animals. The land was the commons. The native Abenaki people lived within the natural community in close-knit family bands. They were the commoners of their local catchments. Their ethnicity was ecological because their survival depended on it!

The verdant forests Champlain witnessed was the Western Abenaki's legacy of the commons. There was no tragedy of the commons other than the coming exploitation marked by his arrival.

## 2. What is conservation and why should our water commons now be its primary focus?

In the early 1760's New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth made creative land grants west of the former-Abenaki homelands enclosing sweeping hunks of the commons and turning much of what would be Vermont into privately-held property. Land ownership was an essential part of the new economic order!

In the 1790s settlers poured into Vermont and by 1850 over 80% of the verdant, temperate, hardwood rainforest had been stripped or burned leaving the mountains deeply gullied and the receiving waters thick with sediment. Though Vermont is nearly 80% forested many of the ecological impacts from those original clearings of the first enclosures still remain.

In the late 1880's George Perkins Marsh, Gifford Pinchot and a host of others called for a new economic relationship with the land. Pinchot said we needed *conservative logging*. He proposed 'practical, sustained-yield forestry' "to protect forests from fire, insects and thieves; to encourage strong, abundant reproduction; and to provide plenty of high quality trees ripe and ready for the axe." In other words conservative logging meant *Wise Use*.

In 1923 Aldo Leopold was inspired "to think like a mountain" by Piotr Ouspensky's aptly-named *Tertium Organum* -- released in English that year. Leopold agreed with Ouspensky's notion that entire ecosystems functioned as one organism. Leopold penned a three-part essay entitled *Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest*. Though the essay remained in his drawer when he died in 1948 and remained unpublished until 1979, the third part entitled *Conservation as a Moral Issue* was the foundation of his remarkable life's work.

It was Leopold who later wrote that "Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve that capacity." He also wrote that sustaining the woodlot bank may be important but the essential task of conservation is to refrain from undermining the ecological functions and values by which forested ecosystems sustain themselves. He called this *Group B Forestry*.

And just as the blood that flows through our veins gives great insights into the nature of our relationships with our bodies, Leopold knew better than anyone that the water that flows through our forests and over our fields gives great insights into the nature of our relationships with the land.

In sum, there are two compelling reasons why lentic and lotic waters should be the primary focus of our conservation efforts particularly in these times when the climate is changing so rapidly and gully-washing peak flows are becoming so frequent and so destructive:

- The condition of our rivers and lakes during and immediately following peak storm flows is an excellent indicator of ecosystem health and flood resilience, AND
- Water is still commonly-held in Vermont.

3. Given the predicted storm events of a rapidly changing climate, what more can be done on less to protect our water commons?

First and foremost we must remember back to the verdant, spongy, unenclosed rain-forested catchments that so impressed Champlain. Our primary goal must be to encourage large portions of our ditched watersheds to renew themselves as spongy forest catchments.

“Slow food, slow wood, and slow water!”

We can help. How?

We must recognize that all sustainability is local. Our focus and our conservation units should be our home catchments. It is only there that we can cultivate the intense consciousness of the land which is so essential to its conservation.

Like the Abenakis before us, we need local commoners who are actively engaged in the type of conservation that Leopold inspired – understanding and preserving the capacity of home catchments for self-renewal especially in the face of storm events.

We need to do a much better job of exploring, mapping, and celebrating our home catchments.

More specifically, we need to move beyond the AAPs and the AMPs to OCPs – Optimal Conservation Practices that conserve the capacity of the land for self renewal in the face of storm events. These Optimal Conservation Practices must be crisp, effective, and measureable. They must address such things as: riparian zone widths and condition; access networks; stream crossing requirements; sodded swales; and more – practices that work exceptionally well for our unenclosed water commons in the face of gully-washing storm events.

The Riverwatch networks are a super beach head and they should be expanded in number and scope.

Starting with public lands, conserved lands, and lands enrolled in current use, commoners should be much more actively involved in monitoring the level of compliance with the Optimal Conservation Practices.

In addition public investments in private lands and businesses should include provisions to protect our water commons even during storm events. For example, forty Vermont schools have been heavily subsidized to heat with wood. How well is the associated logging conserving our water commons when it rains hard?

We need a student-based Common Waters Corps to help answer these and other sorts of questions. Let’s trade student debt for student data!

We need to take a very hard look at the Current Use Program. We should be much less concerned about how much timber and how many agricultural products are being extracted from the enclosed portions of the land and much more concerned with how well our unenclosed water

commons is being protected during storm events. How about renaming it the Current Health Program?

## **IN CONCLUSION**

The peak flow events of a rapidly changing climate require a new paradigm for land conservation that includes private interests, public interests, and common interests. All three should be well represented at the conservation table.

Along with the unenclosed air and critters, our unenclosed water commons is an essential leg of the conservation stool.

As holders of the unenclosed water, air, and critter elements of the land, we should re-invent our partnerships with the holders of the enclosed elements of the land including its soil and vegetation to allow our ditched watersheds to return to being the spongy catchments they naturally want to be.

The quality of our unenclosed water commons during storm events can help guide our work.

As commoners we can re-create an ecological ethnicity based upon our healthy, resilient water commons.

And local organizations like The Lewis Creek Association can play an expanded role in organizing the conservation, educating the commoners, and tracking the progress --- storm by storm, catchment by catchment.

*May the rainforest be with us!*