



CARING FOR OUR HOME GROUNDS:

A Commons Conservation Congress for Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion

Ideas and Workbook for Conservation Congress Participants

At this year's Conservation Congress, we are very interested in diving deep into tangible commons conservation action. Although it's not essential, taking time in the quiet of your own home to ponder the following questions may help you prepare to participate fully in the congress. We welcome and are grateful for all ideas, so let it rip!

Here are some questions to consider in advance of the Commons Conservation Congress. We've given some of our thoughts about each of the questions below, and have left space for you to write down your own thoughts. So, print these 4 pages, fill in your responses to the questions, and bring them with you to the Congress!

- **What are the commons? What is commoning? Who are the commoners?**
- **What is the Center-West Ecoregion, and why are we focusing the discussion on this region?**
- **Are there particular places within the Center-West Ecoregion where you are especially familiar/intimate with the water, wildlife, and air commons?**
- **What is alive in those particular portions of the commons?**
- **What are you already doing to care for our water, wildlife, and air commons?**
- **What more can/should we do to care well for our local commons? What specific commoning efforts can you imagine to bring us closer to caring well for the commons?**
- **How can we commoners improve cooperation in providing for our legitimate uses while understanding and preserving the health, beauty, and productivity of the water, wildlife, and air commons?**

- **What are the commons? What is commoning? Who are the commoners?**

The Commons is an ancient social form that has survived for centuries, constantly renewing itself. It can be seen in indigenous agriculture and community forests, Bolivian water committees and high-tech FabLabs, theater commons, and the Burning Man Festival. Commoners are taking charge of their lives through networks that are designing open-space farm equipment, alternative currencies, and collaborative maps that are helping build a new economy.

David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *Patterns of Commoning* (2015)

Commons are parts of our environment (natural, social, and cultural) that are unenclosed and unowned—something we all share. In Vermont, and around the world, there are many social, financial, and cultural commons. However, the Commons Conservation Congress will focus on the *natural* commons of Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion, including all the surface and ground **waters**, the full range of free roaming fish and **wildlife** species, and the **air** and its pollutants, including but not limited to CO₂.

Commoning, according to commons activist David Bollier, is a radical concept “because it insists upon the active, knowing participation of people in shaping their own lives and meeting their own needs. A commons requires active, ongoing participation with others in implementing and maintaining a shared purpose.” **Commoners** are people of a particular place who undertake the act of commoning. “There is no commons without *commoning*,” Bollier writes. “There are no commons without *commoners*.”

The integrity of the commons requires commoners who are willing to step up, know, take responsibility for, and carefully monitor the health, beauty, and integrity of the air, water, and wildlife commons.

Some of Vermont’s air, water, and wildlife commons are protected or managed by conservation easement. While the State of Vermont is the trustee of most of these natural commons, commoners and commoning are essential in understanding and preserving the ecological health, social values, and economic vitality of these commons. Citizen scientists, volunteers of all sorts, and conservation NGOs are examples of commoners and commoning. In this time of global heating and climate crisis, empowering commoners to undertake effective, active commoning have never been more essential. Re-awakening the power of the commons is our task here and now.

During the Congress, we’ll be exploring Vermont Conservation Design (VCD) as a powerful tool to identify and prioritize key portions of the landscape that are essential to conserving the health and resilience of the air, water, and wildlife commons in the Center-West Ecoregion. Prior to the Congress, you can learn more about the Vermont Conservation Design in an excellent [summary report](#). During the Congress we’ll explore and identify effective ways to act upon VCD’s landscape-level information and analysis. You can get a sense of the power of the VCD tool by exploring [Biofinder](#), a web-based tool that allows you to zero in on VCD ecological information at any scale—from statewide to individual parcels of land. Use it to see what’s cooking, ecologically, on your own land and neighborhood and how those lands fit ecologically within the greater Center-West Ecoregion.

Commoning does not rely on conventional, top-down organizational structure. Rather it thrives on polycentric governance. Professor Elinor Ostrom earned a Nobel Prize for Economics for her work on poly-centric governance. One of the great achievements for which she was recognized was her “Eight Design Principals for Successful Commons” (1990). To enhance their accessibility, the “Eight Points of Orientation for Commoning” were produced in 2012 and will serve as an informal guide for the Commons Conservation Congress:

1. **DEFINING LAND COMMONS:** As a commoner I clearly understand which resources I need to care for and with whom I share this responsibility. Commons resources are those we create together, that we maintain as gifts of nature [e.g. water, air, wildlife], or whose use has been guaranteed to everyone.
2. **PRACTICING MUTUAL-AID:** We use the commons resources that we create, care for, and/or maintain. We use the means (time, space, technology, and quantity of a resource) that are available in a given context. As commoner, I am satisfied that there is a fair relationship between my contributions and the benefits I receive.
3. **ADOPTING RULES & COMMITMENTS:** We enter into or modify our own rules and commitments, and every commoner can participate in this process. Our commitments serve to create, maintain, and preserve the commons while satisfying our needs.
4. **MONITORING:** We monitor the respect of these commitments ourselves and sometimes we mandate others whom we trust to help reach this goal. We continually reassess whether our commitments still serve their purpose.
5. **DEALING WITH ISSUES:** We work out appropriate rules for dealing with violations of our commitments. We determine whether and what kinds of sanctions shall be used, depending on the context and severity of violation.
6. **PROVIDING SPACE & MEANS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION:** Every commoner can make use of a space and means for conflict resolution. We seek to resolve conflicts among us in an easily accessible and straightforward way.
7. **SELF-REGULATING:** We regulate our own affairs, and the external authorities respect that.
8. **NESTING CONSERVATION ENTERPRIZES:** We realize that every commons is part of a larger whole. Therefore, different institutions working at different scales are needed to coordinate stewardship and to cooperate with each other.

Your thoughts about commons and commoning:

- **What is the Center-West Ecoregion, and why are we focusing the discussion on this region?**

You can see a map of the Center-West Ecoregion on our website, <http://familyforests.org/about/where-we-work/>. It's a region roughly bounded to the west by Lake Champlain, to the north by the Winooski River, to the east by the Mad River watershed, and to the south by the Middlebury River and Route 125. Why delineate the bounds of home? Gary Snyder wrote, "Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there." At a time when it's all too easy to throw our hands up in despair at the extent of problems facing the environment across the state, country, and planet, defining the more immediate and intimate place we call home can help us focus in on caring well for it.

Your thoughts about the Center-West Ecoregion:

- **Are there particular places within the Center-West Ecoregion where you are especially familiar/intimate with the water, wildlife, and air commons?**

Are there, for example, particular rivers or lakes that you most deeply connect with and care about, and/or help conserve (water commons)? Particular wildlife species that you observe, help conserve, and/or hunt (wildlife commons)? Old growth forests that you love to visit (air commons, since the bigger trees are, the more carbon they sequester annually)?

- **What is alive in the water, wildlife and/or air commons you noted above?**

The wording of this question borrows from Marshall Rosenberg's work related to Nonviolent Communication. A more familiar way to state the question is, how *are* these commons, deep down, from your perspective? If you could speak for the water, wildlife, and air commons, what would you say?

- **What are you already doing to care for our water, wildlife, and air commons?**

Examples of commoning include wildlife monitoring (like e-bird, Vermont Herp Atlas citizen science, water quality monitoring with Addison County River Watch Collaborative); careful tending of forest access paths; cultivating your forest’s capacity to be a spongy catchment for storm runoff; creating or tending intact riparian zones between agricultural uses and adjacent water bodies, practicing organic land use, setting aside ecological reserves on your land; maintaining hedgerows between agricultural fields; growing big old trees; using forest practices that mimic natural disturbances; maintaining an energy-efficient home; burning well split, dry firewood in efficient stoves; local sourcing for firewood, food, and other things you buy;

- **What more can/should we do to care well for our local water, air, and wildlife commons? What specific commoning efforts can you imagine to bring us closer to caring well for the commons?**

No idea is too far outside the box. For example, at Vermont Family Forests, we have lots of ideas for commoning efforts that might help us care well for the commons—from a shared solar wood kiln to a Commons Conservation Corps to natural burial to revising the Current Use program in a way that will recognize activities that conserve the commons. One specific commoning effort we’re engaged in at the moment is exploring low-cost, organic, inoculation of ash trees against emerald ash borer (which is expected to kill more than 99% of Vermont’s ash trees). Since more than 40 species of insects (part of the wildlife commons) depend fully on ash trees for survival, working together to conserve a remnant population of ash trees in our region may help conservation native wildlife diversity.

- **How can we commoners improve cooperation in providing for our legitimate uses while understanding and preserving the health, beauty, and productivity of the water, wildlife, and air commons?**

What new, different, and/or expanded collaborations among individuals, organizations, and/or communities within the Center-West Ecoregion can you imagine that might benefit the commons? For example, coordinating monitoring and conservation efforts (so we all know what’s happening...); annual gathering of commoning
