



Caring for our Home Grounds

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

November 2, 2019

Proceedings, Emerging Ideas, and Next Steps



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INTRODUCTION

Our climate is changing rapidly, the effects of which are bringing ecological and social changes that will rock our world, both globally and right here in this place we call home. Our federal government is actively undermining efforts to prepare and respond to these changes effectively. It is all too easy to feel hopeless and disempowered by our current state of affairs.

The good news is that we don't have to wait for our government to wake up. We the people can step up as commoners to recognize, reengage with, and care for our home place, particularly those parts of our home place that we all hold in common. Active commoning is not only an antidote to despair, but also an effective, enduring way to care for the land community, of which we humans are a part.

At Vermont Family Forests, the bottom-up, concurrent, empowering nature of commoning caught our interest and imagination as we contemplated how to conserve the health, beauty, and ecological integrity of our home place, which we call Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion. Our home grounds are filled with creative, energetic, imaginative, resilient beings—human and more-than-human—and the possibility of tapping into and connecting the dots of that creative energy led us to the idea of the Commons Conservation Congress.

As we planned the congress, we imagined a forum for sharing ideas of what engaged commoning could look like here in the Center-West Ecoregion. We didn't have answers, only ideas and enthusiasm. Congress participants, and the congress process itself, greatly advanced and deepened the commoning conversation. The pages that follow will highlight the conversations that unfolded during the congress and will suggest tangible next steps.

This is just the first step in developing a vibrant natural commons here at home. We welcome your ideas and your stories about ways you are caring for the air, water, and wildlife commons of home. We're all in this together.



DEFINING THE COMMONS

In the introduction to his latest book, *Free, Fair and Alive*, commons scholar David Bollier asks, "What can we do together? How can we do this outside of conventional institutions that are failing us?" He offers this simple equation for the Commons:

A Commons = a common asset + a community of commoners + a social process (set of shared practices, values, and norms)

In Bollier's words, the Commons is:

- A social system for the long-term stewardship of resources that preserves shared values and community identity.
- A self-organized system by which communities manage resources (both depletable and replenishable) with minimal or no reliance on the Market or State.
- The wealth that we inherit or create together and must pass on, undiminished or enhanced, to our children. Our collective wealth includes the gifts of nature, civic infrastructure, cultural works and traditions, and knowledge.
- A sector of the economy (and life!) that generates value in ways that are often taken for granted—and often jeopardized by the Market-State.



Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion



Finding Home

"Find your place on the planet. Dig in, and take responsibility from there."

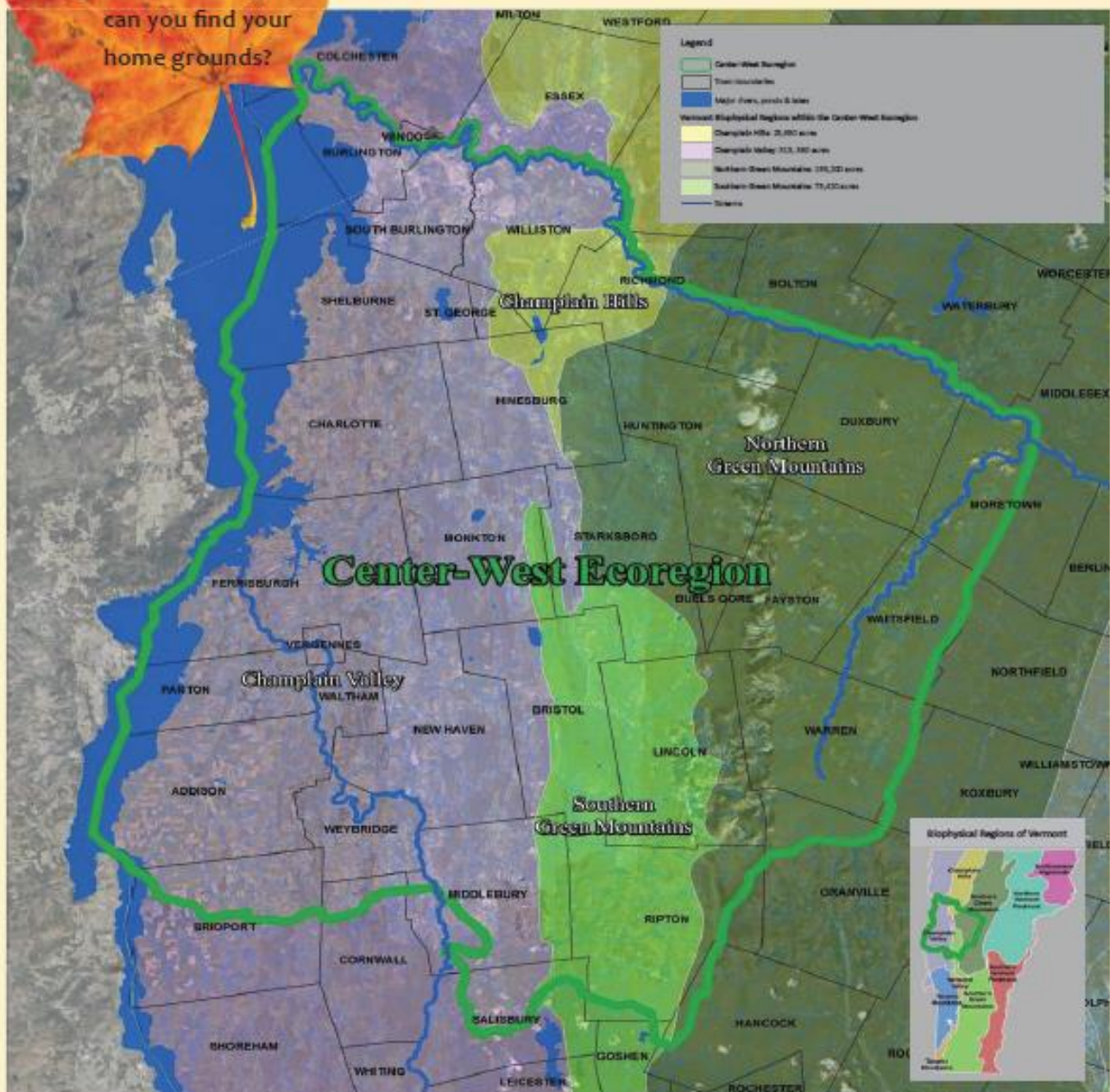
– Gary Snyder

"We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love."

– Wendell Berry



In this time of climate crisis, we hear a lot of distressing news about the state of the Earth's natural places. We want to help, but it's easy to feel overwhelmed and not know where and how to take part. Defining our beloved home place can help focus our efforts. Where is the place you call home?



OPENING SESSION

Welcome

David Brynn, executive director & conservation forester, Vermont Family Forests

“Hail Winooski River! Hail Mad River! Hail Middlebury River! Hail Lake Champlain!”

With this rousing tribute, *Caring for Our Home Grounds: A Commons Conservation Congress for Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion*, sprang to life.

After welcoming the eighty-plus participants and leading them in a salute to the four waterways that bound Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion, Vermont Family Forests Executive Director David Brynn gave one final instruction: “Now please turn to the person next to you and say, “Hail friend! Welcome to Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion!”

There, in a nutshell, lies the intention and spirit of the Commons Conservation Congress: to celebrate the community of life—human and more-than-human, animate and inanimate—in this place we call home, and to explore ways to care for the land community through the practice of commoning. You can find a full transcript of [David’s opening remarks](#) on the Vermont Family Forests website. We offer excerpts from his talk here:



“Today, we the people who live, work, and play in Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion are gathering as Commoners to explore ways to help our water, wildlife, and air resources weather the storms of an increasingly unpredictable, violent, and rapidly changing climate.

“Aristotle said that there are three types of things and interests—publicly held, privately held, and commonly held. Publicly and privately held things and interests are generally enclosed. The natural ones have deeds and boundaries associated with them. They have ‘yours’ and ‘mine’ associated with them. National forests and family forests are examples of publicly held and privately held things.

“Commonly held things and interests are generally unenclosed. The natural ones generally do not have deeds and property lines associated with them. They have ‘ours’ associated with them. The natural ones flow, roam, and blow across publicly and privately held properties. Water, wildlife, and air are examples of commonly held natural resources.

“Today, we are focusing on the common-pool resources of water, wildlife, and air within Vermont’s Center-West Ecoregion. Today, our community is a group of people who have stepped up as commoners to explore how to do a much better job of caring for our

home grounds. Today, a range of protocols, values, norms, and optimal conservation practices will emerge from our facilitated discussions.

“Our water, wildlife, and air are calling out for conservation that is supported by the commoners who live in this place we get to call home. A polluted Lake Champlain, our increasingly fragmented wildlife habitats, and an atmosphere that is choked with carbon all show that effective Commoning is needed.

“Buckminster Fuller reminded us that with any challenge, it is important to start with the Universe, and it is equally important to be naïve enough to believe that we can make positive differences that will move us to a better place.

“We can do this if we tap our collective consciousness, if we celebrate our ecological ethnicity, if we focus less on fighting the bad and much more on imagining and manifesting the good, if we embrace concurrence and inclusive, polycentric governance, if we move from a bio-centric world view to an eco-centric one, if we think and act wholistically, if we employ the indigenous virtues of gratitude, the western virtues of prudence, and the eastern virtues of compassion. If we give each other and the land our mutual-aid and support.”



An Abenaki Perspective

Melody Brook, Elnu Abenaki citizen, educator, and activist

When we began planning the congress, we knew that an essential voice was that of the original commoners of this land—the Abenaki people. Melody Brook is a citizen of the Elnu Abenaki Tribe and has been an educator and activist for more than a decade.

Melody joined us via teleconferencing. Visit the Vermont Family Forests website for a video of her talk, some of which we have excerpted here:



In case we ran into technical glitches with our video conferencing, Melody made a [video of her presentation](#), which is available for viewing on the Vermont Family Forests website.

Melody began with a quote from author, botanist, and Potawatomi citizen Robin Wall Kimmerer:

“What if we could fashion a restoration plan that grew from understanding multiple meanings of land? Land as sustainer. Land as identity. Land as grocery store and pharmacy. Land as connection to our ancestors, Land as moral obligation. Land as sacred. Land as self.” (Braiding Sweetgrass, p 337.)

“For me, land is everything that I am. Land is not a static term for [the Abenaki people]. I pray every morning and I thank the sun for being here. I have an active participation in the world itself. The Wabanaki people are the first people that see the light of dawn. When the sun comes up we say thank you and we pass it to the west. Because of us, the sun rises every day, so you’re welcome!

“When we say that all things are animate in our world, it goes deeper, because everything that’s part of creation is a person. And if you’re a person you have will and you have thoughts of your own, you have something inside of you—it’s that fire of life. So, whether it’s a rock or it’s the beautiful hawk that visited me on the first day, or my dog who’s whining to come out here because he can’t see me, they’re all people. Look at all of my relatives—look at my beautiful relative, the water over there. I talk to them all the time. And I let them know that we’re in this together.

“Our reality [is] that the world is there, it loves you, it protects you. It is everything, it’s your identity, and so when I go out to the world every morning, it’s not just this place I have to protect. My mother? She doesn’t need protecting. She will take care of herself, and eventually, it will reset. For us, I like to think of land as my relative that we always have to be in a reciprocal relationship with.

“Part of [my role] today was to help people understand what land is and what do you do with all those parts of the land that aren’t owned. I would argue that in the grand scheme of the world, nothing is really owned. And so maybe we could come up with a new plan—within the context of our current society—and maybe the plan has more to do with helping people understand their connection to place.”

Keynote Address: Vermont Conservation Design in the Center-West Ecoregion

Eric Sorenson, natural community ecologist , Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

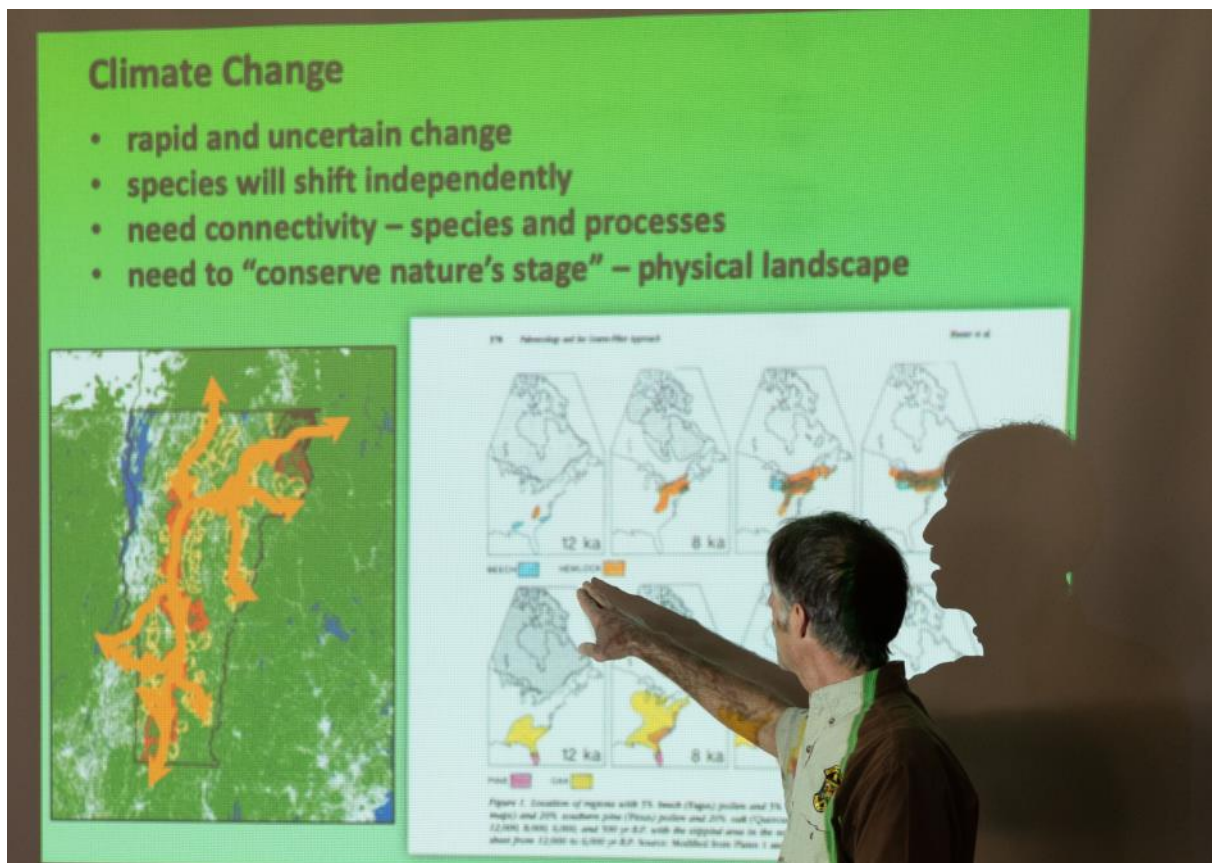
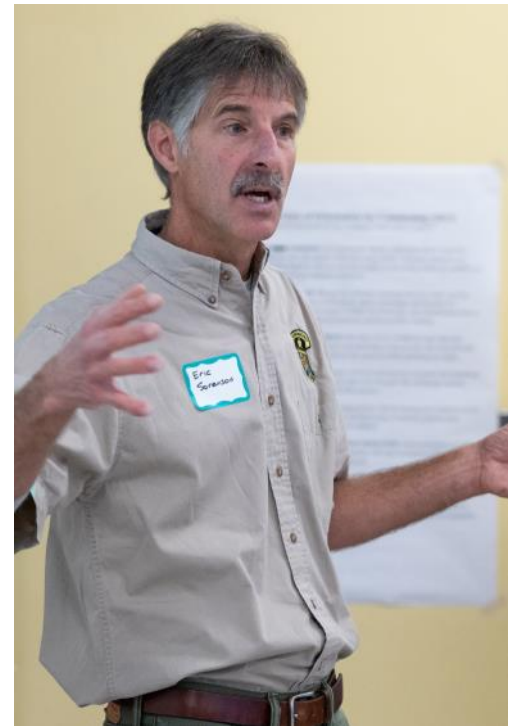
In his work as the natural community ecologist for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, our keynote speaker, Eric Sorenson, describes and classifies Vermont's natural communities and works with landowners to conserve important natural communities. He also conducts state-wide natural community inventories and identifies opportunities to protect biological diversity and landscape-scale features, such as large habitat blocks and wildlife corridors.

Eric co-created Vermont Conservation Design (VCD), a landscape-level plan to conserve the ecological integrity and function of Vermont natural landscape. In his keynote address, Eric explored VCD and the insights it offers into conservation hotspots across the state and within Vermont's Center-West Ecoregion.

The foundation of Vermont Conservation Design is an intact, connected network of unfragmented forest blocks, surface waters, and riparian areas. Within that overarching network, specific natural communities and habitat features—such as hemlock forests, valley clayplain forests, rich fens, young forests, old forests, caves, and the like—support particular species or ecological functions. Such an intact landscape naturally conserves air, water, and wildlife.

Vermont Conservation Design offers the vision of a healthy, resilient land community. It does not prescribe how to manifest this vision. That's up to we the people to decide and to enact.

Although we don't have a transcript of Eric's talk, you'll find his [detailed PowerPoint presentation](#) on our website.



BREAKOUT SESSION IDEAS & RESPONSES

After the plenary talks, participants chose one of three breakout sessions to attend. Each of the sessions focused on one of the natural commons—Air, Water, and Wildlife. Participants were asked to ponder the following questions and share their ideas. Below, we have compiled their responses to questions 1, 2, 4, and 5, combining similar answers. Since question 3 is specific to each of the commons, we have separately compiled responses for each breakout room.

1. **Wendell Berry wrote, “We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love.” What do you love about the natural commons of the Center-West Ecoregion?**
2. **In what tangible ways are we already caring for the Center-West Ecoregion’s natural commons?**
3. **What additional conservation actions related to AIR (carbon sequestration)/ WATER/ WILDLIFE (whichever commons your room is focused on) in the Center-West Ecoregion are most compelling to you?**
4. **What, specifically (for example: tools, funding, organizational structures, etc.), will help move these commoning conservation actions forward? In other words, what vehicle(s) will help us move from ideas to action?**
5. **Vermont Family Forests is thinking about creating something like a Center-West Ecoregion Wiki (a wiki is a knowledge-base website on which users collaboratively modify content and structure) to help record, track, and share commoning actions (monitoring, conservation actions, etc) within our ecoregion. Do you think this would be a helpful tool?**

Question 1. What do you love about the Center-West Ecoregion?

- Beauty (scenic views, water, rivers, mountains) which calls us to action & involvement
- Resilience, which inspires hope
- Diversity, complexity, and richness of life
- The accessibility and proximity of wilderness
- The joy of seeing, hearing, and finding signs of diverse wildlife
- Gentle interdigitation of forest and farm landscape
- Islands of high biodiversity/ complexity of ecosystems
- Natural world persisting among human activity
- Heritage of connection with nature
- Rich diversity of already protected lands
- Simplicity of life
- Restoration of body, mind, spirit
- Topographic variation
- Its seasonal fragrances
- Lack of pollution/unspoiled nature/visual clarity/no large point sources of pollution
- Visitors notice the quality of life here
- Organizations like Efficiency VT, encouraging more efficient wood stoves
- The forests/ forest bathing
- The feeling of the air in different habitats, elevations, seasons
- Less acid rain than in the past
- Sunsets over Lake Champlain
- Variety of weather



Question 2. How are we caring for the Center-West Ecoregion now?

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, NETWORKING, and PROGRAMS

- Sharing information on Front Porch Forum
- NRCS cost-share programs for wildlife habitat
- Vermont Coverts program
- Use Value/Current Use program
- Conservation easements, covenants, and other legal restrictions on development
- Conservation commissions
- Groups working with USFS regarding logging practices
- Robust conservation infrastructure of diverse non-profit organizations—reaching many demographics and communities
- Participatory/transformational state policymaking
- State and town zoning ordinances
- Community education opportunities/ Community gatherings like this one/outreach and civic engagement
- Regulation and enforcement, especially farms and game wardens
- Emergence of ag community conversations on ecosystem services
- Expanded partnerships with ag and transportation
- Town and regional planning/ clustered development
- Strong community ties
- Cooperative legislators

SPECIFIC PRACTICES and ACTIONS

- Inventorying and identifying natural communities and habitat
- Underpasses, especially Monkton underpass for amphibians
- Fish ladders—aquatic connectivity
- Hunting and fishing
- Caring for private lands
- Protecting soil flora/fauna & pollinators
- Sustainable forest management practices (like leaving coarse woody debris in the forest)
- Unmanaged forests/wild forests
- Storm water regulations/addressing water runoff on farms
- Citizen science (Addison County River Watch Collaborative, Amphibian escort, etc.)
- Existing public transportation
- VT mandate to get 90% of its energy from renewable sources by 2050
- Kids are being taught to be stewards/Outdoor classrooms are more prevalent
- Middlebury College managing its forests for carbon sequestration & storage
- Bill McKibben
- State incentives for e-cars
- Lots of bikers/bike paths/biking advocacy
- Car-sharing organization
- Vibrant country stores and local food
- Farmers who are building soil to hold carbon
- Methane bio-digesters
- Laws eliminating idling/no idling signs



Question 3a. What additional conservation activities related to WILDLIFE in the Center-West Ecoregion are most compelling to you?

LAND PRACTICES

- Manage less forests (in number and intensity)
- Leave half of the Earth for other beings
- Enhance wildlife road crossings by mowing less
- Protect waterways, including riparian zones
- Focus on insect decline, not just pollinators: monitor pesticide use and mowing regimes
- Find and protect old growth/ create more old growth
- Create time to spend in nature, forest bathing, preserve sacred spaces

EDUCATION & PLANNING

- Figure out where and how to keep and increase habitat connectivity
- Coordinate between all groups and interested parties
- Expand the “choir” so that more people are engaged
- Hold a Wildlife Conservation Congress to pool expertise and resources in meaningful and ongoing way
- Educate landowners/ education to prevent loss of ecological function
- Engage zoning professionals to facilitate landscape values
- Town energy plan
- Assess trails—where are they, how are they used, what exists?
- Education and outreach about posting land and its implications for wildlife
- Change UVA to value forest practices that sustain ecosystem services
- Expand definition of “working” landscape. Pay attention to how we use language
- Educate about options in forest management planning to reflect a broad range of values
- Expand the definition of wildlife to include all wildlife
- Keep land in local/state/private hands
- Trainings to use resources in place
- Have an ecologist on zoning board
- Assess our ecological reserves and wilderness areas. Do we need more? Where?
- Make education resources more widely accessible

COMMUNICATION/VALUES

- Cultivate personal love and connection with land
- Listen for common ground
- Facilitate communication across tribes



Question 3b. What additional conservation activities related to WATER in the Center-West Ecoregion are most compelling to you?

LAND PRACTICES

- Pay for ecosystem services, like floodplains and soil health
- Implement science-based standards for soil health
- Restore the landscape’s ability to be a sponge
- Share and carry out best practices in farms and forests
- Preserve floodplains as proactive tool to mitigate flooding
- Incentivize good land management practices to reduce water pollution
- Expand citizen science
- Better science-based standards for water quality

EDUCATION & PLANNING

- Better land use and development planning within larger global climate refuge
- Green infrastructure for transportation and clustered development
- Modernize and upgrade the legal definition of wetlands and floodplains
- Build on conservation congress conversations
- Organizational structures
- Facilitate networking and information sharing and outreach
- Expand regional organizational capacity
- Community standards (for land use and water quality) that exceed those of the state
- Build trust and collaborate with farmers
- Go beyond “sustainable” to “regenerative”

Question 3c. What additional conservation activities related to AIR in the Center-West Ecoregion are most compelling to you?

TRANSPORTATION

- Create effective system for ridesharing
- Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) – multistate initiative
- Commuter rail system
- Cultural change with size of vehicle (gas mileage)
- Better interstate public transportation options (more frequent & less expensive trains & busses, etc)
- Promote/improve/fund public transportation

LAND ACTIONS

- Incentives to lower tax burden on land owners
- Advocate for funding for family farms
- Legislative support for local economies
- Land use planning that encourages clustering of development
- Education about biomass—is it good or bad?
- Incentivize keeping forests as forests
- Carbon-focused forest management
- Education/new ideas to keep carbon in the soil

VALUES

- Attention to equity for all people when considering potential changes
- Overcome a fear-based economy
- Cultivate local economies
- Regenerative agriculture
- Regenerative human capital
- Education around what is air
- Consider foundational drivers of our economy
- How do we consider all economic, cultural, etc. perspectives?
- Decision-making structures – micro/macro tension

Question 4. What will help bring these actions into being?

EDUCATION & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Educating in schools—youth ed connection
- Really thinking about how we communicate to be inclusive
- Work with planning commissions
- Democratized multi-generational engagement
- Contact legislators with your thoughts and values—now!
- Be active, engaged, urgent
- Have conservation commission member on zoning/select

board—collaboration

- Provide strategic information with tax bills to support conservation techniques
- Identify conservation priorities in town plan
- Create information clearinghouse on ways citizens can connect and collaborate with existing conservation efforts
- Reach beyond the chorus, to those not here at the conservation congress

FUNDING & TOOLS

- Money for conservation/ approach land trusts
- Allocation of tax funds for conservation
- Tools for keeping soil and water in place

- Tools for improving and restoring wildlife habitat
- More support for conserving forest land
- Conservation counseling—expert help

ACTIONS

- Expand citizen science
- Develop a robust best-management-practices list
- Create sacred spaces and make them accessible and democratized
- Create more walking paths, accessible to all
- Offer 2-hour ecological boot camp, reaching outside the choir
- Develop regulations to prevent fragmentation
- Engage kids in replanting riparian zones
- Change UVA—include more values
- Look to other models—trails, unmanaged, not posted

- Expand public transport to public spaces
- Connect urban populations to nature
- Encourage collective/collaborative conservation, not just of large parcels
- Develop incentives for caring for wildlife
- Collaborate with business
- Offer compensation to landowners whose land management provides ecosystem services
- Implement more water, wildlife & air monitoring
- Coordinate current conservation activities



Question 5. Vermont Family Forests is thinking about creating something like a Center-West Ecoregion Wiki (a wiki is a knowledge-base website on which users collaboratively modify content and structure) to help record, track, and share commoning actions (monitoring, conservation actions, etc) within our ecoregion. **Do you think this would be a helpful tool?**

The majority of participants supported the idea. Participants offered the following feedback:

- Concern about information overload
- Many other groups already have something similar
- If we do this, have links to other organizations working on similar initiatives
- Must be moderated and have periodic “nudges” when there is new information and to post information
- Make sure it’s active, not passive

THE COMMONERS’ LUNCH—SAVORING LOCAL BOUNTY

After the breakout sessions, and before we re-convened to share our ideas, we shared a much-needed lunch. Preparing and offering food is an expression of love. So much loving care went into the foods we offered during the congress. The day began with Kyra’s amazing forest teas and cookies (see her story on page 14), locally roasted coffee from Vermont Coffee Company, cider donuts from Happy Valley Orchard, and apples and cider from VFF’s Wells Farm in Lincoln. Later, we offered squash soup and tomato bisque made with local ingredients—many of them grown at Wells Farm—along with cheese from Orb Weaver Farm and bread from Otter Creek Bakery.

Every ingredient carried its own threads of caring connection to place. The delicious Orb Weaver cheese is imbued with the story of nearly 40 years of small-scale farming and cheesemaking artistry by Marjorie Susman and Marian Pollack of New Haven. The butternut squash, onions, garlic, and tomatoes that went into much of the soup grew under the tender care of VFF’s homestead steward Dechen Rheault, and every apple was picked by her hand. Delicious desserts brought by congress participants crowded the table, their untold stories sweetening the smorgasbord.

We asked participants to bring their own bowls and spoons if possible. So as people came one by one to the food table, each held out their own unique and beautiful bowl, and we joyfully filled them. Nourished by giving, nourished by receiving, all around.



COMMONERS IN ACTION

One of the many wonderful and unexpected aspects of the conservation congress were the generous acts of unsolicited commoning that emerged. We share a few of them here.

Kira Kristof and Forest Foods

A few weeks before the conservation congress, we received a lovely email from Kyra Kristof, offering to bring forest-based food and drinks to the congress. This was no small offer—not only because it involved much plant gathering and preparation, but also because Kyra is from Northampton, Massachusetts. She had heard about the gathering from her Monkton-based friend, Adam Bouchard, who planned to attend the congress. We happily agreed, though we had little idea what to expect.

The bounty and deliciousness of her offerings floored us. She had prepared three hot forest teas (chaga tea, white pine needle tea, and mineral mint tea, made from peppermint, nettles and nori), a cold tea of hemlock and autumn olive (which Kyra explained would become a bubbly soda if allowed to ferment), and the most amazingly delicious hickory hazelnut cookies, made with an infusion of roasted shagbark hickory bark.

Kyra explains her attraction to creating forest-based food and drink. “In New England,” she says, “we live in a place that is largely forest, and yet eat foods that primarily come from an annual open-field agriculture. I hold deep curiosity about what our cuisine might look like if we were to embrace being nourished by our forested places.

“I look to human foodways and medicine traditions from this and other forested regions for wisdom, to shifting forest communities (emerging novel ecosystems) to reveal flavor combinations of a cuisine that weaves the culinary and the medicinal back together, and to the plants themselves for guidance as to how they and we can dance together to bring greater aliveness to ourselves and our home places.

“Forests are our partners in respiration. If we conspire (breath with) forests to nourish our human aliveness in the world, we naturally attend to the ways in which we bring greater aliveness to the forests.”



Hickory Hazelnut Cookies

Kyra shared her recipe for Hickory Hazelnut Cookies with us. It has a long narrative, so we'll share the beginning of the recipe, and you can [read the full recipe](#) on our website, with the Conservation Congress proceedings. Kyra writes:

This recipe honors the mineral richness of shagbark hickory's outer bark, the sweetness of sap from sugar maple and the nuts from hazelnut growing in the shady understory of this forested place. Embedded within it is an invitation to learn how to identify shagbark hickory, notice where they live in your community, develop a relationship, and practice receiving the gift of part of a living tree's body in a respectful way. The steps include:

- Gathering bark from shagbark hickory
- Roasting bark
- Infusing roasted bark into maple syrup
- Grinding hazelnuts
- Combining ground nuts with infused syrup
- Forming into small cookie balls
- Baking cookies

For details on the process, visit the Vermont Family Forests website.

NEXT STEPS

The ideas generated within the congress are already rooting and sprouting. Many commoning actions and initiatives have emerged both here at Vermont Family Forests and with commoners who have shared with us what they've been up to since the congress. We'll describe the ones we know of below. Because commoning is a bottom-up, from-the-roots process, it is, by design, multi-faceted and polycentric. Some of us will have time to step into commoning action, others may not have time now, but have money to contribute to commoning efforts. Our goal at VFF is to celebrate and build on positive actions, and to make sure, to the best of our ability, that any commoning actions we undertake aim to meet these four criteria:

- Increase water quality
- Increase flood resilience
- Increase wildlife richness
- Increase carbon storage

Here are the ideas that have emerged since the congress:

1. **Exploring a community-based information-sharing platform** (wiki). Nate Gusakov and Adam Bouchard jumped right into that process, working with VFF to begin the process of imagining a useful, easy-to-use platform that aides the process of commoning here in the Center-West Ecoregion. The wiki would be a portal for engagement. Ideally it would be imagined, initiated, run, and updated by commoners, with some measure of oversight and facilitation.
2. **Creating a Commons Conservation Corps.** We're excited about the notion of a volunteer group of commoners of all ages and all walks of life whose efforts increase water quality, flood resilience, wildlife richness, and carbon storage in the Center-West Ecoregion. The wiki (see #1) may be a helpful tool in organizing volunteers and sharing commoning opportunities.
3. **Creating four sub-watershed monitoring demonstration sites** on public (federal, state, municipal) private, and conserved lands. We at VFF are really interested in identifying a meaningful, effective, useful, and community-building monitoring process for keeping our collective fingers on the pulse of the health of our home place.

Currently, the Addison County River Watch Collaborative and the Friends of the Mad River are monitoring water quality on some of our ecoregional waterways. We'd like to determine whether the existing metrics are giving us all the insights we need to address water quality issues, like heavily silted water during storm flows. In addition to keeping an eye on the water, we'd like to keep an eye on the surrounding watershed to know how conditions on the ground are affecting water quality, for better or worse.

To do that we plan to develop and test a monitoring process for four 1,500-2,500-acre sub-watersheds in different sites within the Center-West Ecoregion. At this point, we've identified three of the four sites.

- **Isham Brook** sub-watershed in Lincoln, which includes municipal, private, and conserved lands.
- **Norton Brook** sub-watershed, which includes private, and conserved lands, including the 1,001-acre lands of The Watershed Center.
- **Middle Branch of the Middlebury River** sub-watershed, which includes federal, private, and conserved lands.
- TBD sub-watershed in the northeast portion of the Center-West Ecoregion, including lands of **Camels Hump State Park**.

Monitoring in these sub-watersheds would include water quality sampling and compliance with optimal conservation practices. We plan to make use of readily accessible Lidar data to help assess topography, and Vermont Conservation Design data to assess the existence of ecological hotspots (riparian zones, ecologically sensitive sites, wildlife crossings, etc.) In the process, we'll look for examples of practices that have been working well and opportunities for improvement. Our aim is to have a corps of volunteers who live near those lands take on the monitoring, so the monitoring carbon footprint is minimal. The goal is to actively engage commoners in assessing our common-pool assets and the land practices that impact them.

4. **Optimal Conservation Practices.** We at Vermont Family Forests will be updating our organic forest health conservation checklist to be current with state-of-the-art knowledge on climate change, particularly as it relates to air water and wildlife.
5. **Exploring the feasibility of setting up a local water sampling lab** (which could also potentially be used for air and soils testing as well), because testing has emerged as an expensive bottleneck in the process of monitoring local waters. This could be a great opportunity for local commoners to help with the testing process. Doing that testing locally will help reduce the carbon footprint of water testing, since currently samples must be driven to Randolph.
6. **Volunteer monitoring opportunities on Forest Service lands.** Mark Nelson is engaged in conversations with the US Forest Service about opportunities for volunteers to learn and carry out the USFS monitoring protocols to assess timber sales, adherence to Best Management Practices, trail conditions and use, and the like. The USFS needs help with monitoring, and they're enthusiastic about volunteers.
7. **Continued learning about optimal commons conservation practices.** For example, on February 6, Bill Keeton, professor of the UVM Rubenstein School forest ecology will give a presentation at Ilsley Library in Middlebury on the state of science of forest ecosystem conservation in a rapidly changing climate.
8. **Encourage changes to Vermont's Use Value Program that value wildlands conservation.** Commoners in the Center-West Ecoregion are helping plant those seeds. Melissa and Shawn Hoffman of Huntington are hosting conversations to expand UVA to embrace and celebrate wildlands conservation.
9. **Commons Conservation Tool Share**—We at Vermont Family Forests have a legacy log forwarding trailer and a hand forwarding trailer, which facilitate soil-friendly, light-on-the-land forestry. We're really interested in figuring out an efficient, safe way for these to get used, with the potential for expanding the tool-sharing protocol we come up with to other tools that other people have throughout the Center-West Ecoregion. We're aware that there are underutilized tools out there that could address on-the-ground issues.
10. **Seeds of hope:** Vermont Family Forests is in the process of investigating low-cost inoculation of small ash tree groves (3-5 trees), inoculating them so they can continue to produce seed, as a proactive response to the arrival of emerald ash borer, which is projected to rapidly kill more than 99% of our white, black, and green ash trees.
11. **Schools as community centers.** Our public schools are a commons. Holding the Commons Conservation Congress at Mount Abraham Union High School was a wonderful commoning experience. The school stepped up fully to the process—welcoming us to use the space at no cost, offering help at every turn (special thanks to Devin Wendel and Mike Orvis), and providing a bright, well cared for facility. We were honored to reciprocate with a donation to the school. Our community is currently deeply engaged in imagining how to adapt and use our school infrastructure in ways that work optimally for the whole community. How might commoning figure in? Perhaps, for example, an underutilized portion of one of our schools could hold the water sample testing lab (see #5).
12. **Explore the potential for a collaborative organizational network to achieve landscape-level conservation in the Center-West Ecoregion.** Middlebury College students in Environmental Studies 401 have partnered with Vermont Family Forests to carry out two projects this semester that will greatly enhance our commoning efforts. In the first project, students are exploring the potential for increasing the effectiveness, opportunities, and constraints of regional coordination of conservation efforts. Students will be presenting their findings at the January 2020 Vermont Family Forests board meeting.
13. **Explore the potential for access by Abenaki citizens to private forest lands in the Center-West Ecoregion.** The second group of Middlebury College ES401 students are exploring the potential for an agreement process by which Abenaki citizens could access private forestlands for harvesting wild materials for medicine, crafts, food, and so on. The students are facilitating a meeting in early December of a small group of interested forestland owners, Chief Don Stevens, and others to explore what such an agreement could look like.
14. **Breathe life into old commoning ideas.** Good ideas that could benefit our air, water, and wildlife commons have emerged in our ecoregion over the years. Steven Taylor's solar kiln design comes quickly to mind, as does the Neighborwood Heating Cooperative. We plan to archive such ideas in a format that's easily accessible and searchable.
15. **Commoner T-shirts** are still available to spread the word about commoning. Just contact Vermont Family Forests: 802-453-7728 or info@familyforests.org.

One of the many empowering aspects of commoning is that you don't need to wait for government or for others to act. Simply find something you love in the commons of this home place of ours, contemplate how you can manifest your love through action, and step into it—whether on your own, with neighbors, or with the broader community. As the old Irish saying goes, the ultimate soul restoration is that which is done on behalf of the Earth. Let's get to it!

GRATITUDE

Deep gratitude to the many people who helped plan and carry out the congress: Mark Nelson, Peg Sutlive, Chris Klyza, Mark Krawyzck, Shelby Perry, Scott Hamshaw, and Caitlin Cusack. To Eric Sorenson and Melody Brook for so generously sharing their wisdom and time. To Christopher Ross for his thoughtful front-page follow-up story in the *Addison Independent*, which brought ideas and actions of the congress into the larger community. To the Mount Abraham Union High School facilities staff for their care and support before and during the congress. To Ali Zimmer, Kyra Kristof, and Anne Dannenberg for their generous and unexpected acts of commoning. To all the anonymous cookie makers who sweetened our congress lunch. And to the 84 participants whose collective imaginative spirits made the congress flourish. May the Forest, and the Commons, be with you!

