

# The conservation journey

Pete Nowak

**M**ost of us recognize that conservation is not a practice, a program, a technical standard, or a plan. Neither is conservation another name for a government financial incentive. As Aldo Leopold so eloquently reminded us, conservation is a precarious, never-ending process of seeking harmony between land and people (Leopold 1966). Conservation is a journey.

Unfortunately, the conservation journey today, like so many travels, is restricted to well-worn paths. We choose to pursue the conservation journey on the interstate rather than on the blue highway. Conservation is a topic to be addressed with a “tweet” rather than seeking out the subtle nuances and complexities of the written chronicle. We continually seek a conservation path characterized by convenience, speed, and simplicity—a superficial, quick fix to our conservation challenges resulting in a jaunt rather than a journey.

Our conservation journey is stuck in a rut. We have created uniform and standardized pathways to conservation with technical guides, models, and consistent program requirements. These regimented processes become prerequisites for an ever-increasing diversity of conservation programs supported by progressively more public dollars. We are slow to learn that more dollars do not necessarily translate into more conservation. More funds, however, do mean more accountability, which transforms conservationists into accountants and program managers.

My thesis as a subversive conservationist is simple, direct, and unpopular. We have overinvested in cost-share programs and the administrative structures of our many conservation programs while significantly underinvesting in the quality and quantity of our professional conservationists. Too much has been spent on incentives with little to show for these investments, while

only minimal effort has been put into developing the tools and support needed by local conservationists. I am going to argue that we need to explore creating an innovative reward and support system for local conservationists who will build collaborative working relationships with those land users who have the most pressing natural resource management problems.

Leopold reminded us, “We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations, the important thing is not to achieve but to strive” (Leopold 1966). We are stuck in a rut because we have not learned that managing a conservation program is not the same as striving for conservation. Striving also means a constant willingness to explore new and creative ways to advance the conservation mission.

## THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION, CREATIVITY, AND INNOVATION

So how do we get out of this rut and begin to explore alternative pathways toward conservation? I do not have the insightful eloquence of Aldo Leopold or the political acumen of Hugh Bennett, but I have listened to fellow travelers on this conservation journey. I firmly believe that seeking the state of harmony with the land must be driven by imagination, creativity, innovation, and, dare I say, even a sense for adventure.

Why not simply ask for more funds for novel financial incentives or stronger regulations? Remember, we do not embark on the conservation journey for ourselves, but rather for those whom we can persuade to join us in seeking harmony with the land. Professional conservationists are in essence guides. They should be a local resource that helps those who manage our working land find their way on the conservation journey. They should be guides who recognize that program guidelines are not a map, but are just that—guidelines. This leaves significant latitude for experience, training, and an ability to use their imagination, creativity, and innovativeness in addressing



Pete Nowak

complex and often unique circumstances faced by local land users as part of solving resource management problems. These guides deserve our support in helping others begin the conservation journey.

The significant diversity of our agricultural landscapes, coupled with an equal diversity among the people who manage the land, calls into question the efficacy of any standardized financial incentive or regulatory effort. Square pegs do not fit round holes no matter the amount of financial or regulatory pressure placed on those pegs. Consequently, my thesis is that we can only solve important natural resource problems by supporting a large cadre of professional conservationists who are encouraged to apply imagination, creativity, and innovation in addressing the often unique needs of people who own and manage the land. Undertaking a conservation journey does not mean abandoning current efforts or forgoing the lessons of past programs, but it does mean a willingness to explore alternative paths for this journey.

## REWARDING CONSERVATIONISTS

The current parallels between our public education system and our public conservation system are striking. Teachers work with young people to help them gain the skills and attitude needed to reach their potential. Conservationists work with landowners and managers to help them discover how to use their land according

**Pete Nowak** is a professor of environmental studies in the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, Wisconsin.

to its capability. The success or failure of teachers does not manifest itself for years as students achieve maturity in their life quest. The success or failure of conservationists likewise may take years to manifest itself by what land managers are able to accomplish relative to water quality in nearby streams, the quality of soils on a farm field, or the wildlife habitat found on a farm or ranch. Constrained school budgets that result in expanding class sizes or parents who accept no responsibility for their children, however, can nullify teacher's best efforts. Local conservationist's understanding of management needs can also be nullified by mandated bureaucratic requirements that force them into office cubicles or by absentee landlords and tenant farmers who have no interest in the conservation journey. Unfortunately, neither teachers nor conservationists are rewarded for what they achieve, but rather for what can be measured in an accounting framework. Teachers are rewarded for activities associated with conformity to local school board standards, bureaucratic responsibilities, and, most recently, student test scores. Conservationists are currently rewarded for activities linked to local conservation authorities, bureaucratic responsibilities, and measures associated with the implementation of conservation programs. It does not have to be this way.

I suggest we reward conservation staff for working with land users in discovering how to strive for that precarious balance or harmony between their management decisions and the land. One earns the title of professional conservationist not by occupation or acquiring technical competencies, but by helping others strive for harmony in the management of working land. It is here that the parallels with the public education system may offer some insight on the way forward. We do not pay teachers to take competency tests for students but rather for giving students the knowledge and skills needed to be proficient on those tests and later with life's many challenges. Why not reward conservationists for working with landowners and managers in developing the needed knowledge, skills, and self-sufficiency in striving for balance on their working land? Teaching landowners and managers to fill out the

required forms to gain access to conservation subsidies for a quick technical fix does nothing to help those individuals acquire the skills or desire to undertake the conservation journey. The old metaphor about the difference between giving someone a fish versus giving him or her the opportunity to learn how to fish applies here as well. Rewarding teachers for "teaching to the test" is no different than rewarding conservationists for signing up participants for conservation programs. Neither approach develops the competencies and skills needed for the conservation journey.

Let me propose an adventurous idea. Why not reward our local conservation guides for empowering landowners and managers to solve local natural resource management problems? We have come a long way since the Coon Creek demonstration project of 75 years ago, but this suggestion is consistent with the core philosophy underlying that historic effort. Teaching local farmers that natural resource degradation was not inevitable but rather something manageable was a daunting task. Yet they did it. How, one might ask, do we move from the several hundred land users in Coon Creek to the tens of thousands of individuals and firms who manage our working lands today? The simple answer is that only a minority of farmers and ranchers needs the expertise of a professional conservation guide.

We know that not all natural resource management problems are equal—there is significant variation in the nature, presence, and magnitude of our conservation challenges. Moreover, recent research demonstrates that it is often a small portion of any agricultural landscape that causes a significant portion of the degradation within that landscape. The minority of land managers who engage in inappropriate management actions in vulnerable locations or at inappropriate times should become the focus of our reward system. It is in these places or at these times when persuading a farmer or rancher to begin the conservation journey is most critical and, therefore, deserving of the greatest reward. It is here where we need the services of a conservation guide, and it is here where our reward system needs to be enhanced.

It is also important to remember that any true mentor, whether that is a parent, teacher, or local conservation staff member, also has to apply sanctions under appropriate circumstances. That small proportion of land users who reject conservation or opportunities for collaboration with local conservationists should be sanctioned if they are making disproportionate contributions to those local problems. How this could happen is a topic for future discussion, but the key point is that this sanction would have to be created as the "sharp scalpel" focusing on the few rather than the "dull chainsaw" applied to all, as is often the case when discussing regulation in the conservation arena. Collaborating partners need to know that all will play by the same set of rules. The importance of this understanding is critical. I am not sure which is more harmful to the collective conservation journey—the land user who rejects conservation while significantly degrading the local environment or the conservationist who is encouraged to wink and look the other way relative to this unacceptable behavior.

Yes, there are challenges in developing a system that rewards local conservation staff for collaborating with or even sanctioning a minority of land users to discover how to begin the conservation journey, but can it be that different from what we face in our public education system? Think of all the debate, discussion, community forums, and alternative models being tested in education relative to rewarding teachers and giving our youth requisite skills and knowledge. It is time, I think, to begin a similar process of discussion and discovery in the conservation arena on how to support and reward local staff members who act as guides for those land managers who must deal with the most important natural resource management problems.

### NO SPECTATOR SPORT

Till now, my premise has been that we need to explore an approach where a cadre of local conservation guides will be supported and rewarded for working with farmers or ranchers on solving the most critical local natural resource management problems. This alternative is needed because of the growing recognition that

harmony or balance with the land cannot be externally imposed using an elaborate, complex system of incentives, penalties, and standardized engineering solutions. A local conservationist or university scientist cannot take the journey for a landowner or manager. Receiving a government check from a conservation program is not the same as acquiring the knowledge and motivation to begin the conservation journey. I repeat this point because too many do not see an alternative to the current top-down, paternalistic approach. Paternalistic in the sense that we approach a farmer or rancher and tell him or her that they have a problem, we have the solution, and the question now is simply how much incentive or regulatory threat is needed to induce him or her to adopt the solution to the problem we have defined for them. This is exactly what we have been doing for more than a half century, and it is time to explore other paths for the conservation journey.

The thesis of the conservation journey is that we need to reward local conservationists who build collaborative working relationships with those landowners and managers who have the most pressing natural resource management problems. It is a fact that collaboration works best when the parties involved view each other as equals. Yet, it is difficult to treat someone as an equal partner in a collaborative process when our conservation programs also view this land user as a customer. There is a big difference between a partner and a customer. Customers do not engage in collaborations—they make transactions.

How can we view the manager of working land as an equal and potential partner in the conservation journey? We can do that by taking advantage of the most valuable asset we have for developing the requisite skills and knowledge needed to solve conservation problems, an asset that is ignored or nullified with the current approach. That asset involves capturing the problem-solving skills of farmers and ranchers. Those individuals spend a significant part of each day solving problems that emerge on their farms and ranches. Sick animals, broken machinery, labor availability, market challenges, weather, cash flow, land contracts, availabil-

ity of inputs, pests, or disease are but a few examples of the many problems addressed by landowners and managers on a daily basis. Unfortunately, the wisdom associated with these problem-solving experiences, coupled with their knowledge of the land they manage, are ignored and bypassed in our current top-down approach to conservation. Digitized images, model outputs, and electronic forms on computers at local offices have replaced this rich, indigenous knowledge. Landowners and managers are now viewed only as “customers,” as if conservation were simply another commodity to be bought or sold like the land on which it is applied.

What would happen if we began to reward conservation guides for approaching those landowners and managers who have the most critical natural resource management problems in a locale? Guides would not come off the super highway with a set of prescribed solutions but instead would be rewarded for having a curiosity about how the beginning of a conservation journey could be crafted under the unique circumstances encountered by a particular farmer or rancher. A guide would first observe and listen and then brainstorm with the landowner or manager about ideas that meet the needs and capabilities of the farm or ranch, while also addressing local conservation priorities. A guide would know that the way forward begins with understanding why current management decisions occur and would have the training and support to build from that base. This guide would also seek the advice of those partners on how best to deal with inappropriate behaviors that are occurring in their neighborhoods. This would be a professional mentor who would not impose conservation using standardized protocols, but one who would be rewarded for inspiration, motivation, and collaboration in determining how to best solve the most critical natural resource problems.

### LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN

Are there no off-ramps on this conservation super highway we have constructed? What is the price of a dramatic pileup on this super highway if we continue to accept that an engineered solution, imposed with

an inducement of a government check, is the only way to advance the conservation agenda? Externally imposing a “solution” according to prescribed standards and then moving on to the next “cooperator” may sound good in an engineering or accounting book, but it has little to do with instilling the knowledge and skills needed to undertake the conservation journey. If we accept the fact that conservation must be an adaptive process because of ever-changing and evolving weather, technology, and markets, then, in my view, we face a simple choice as we look forward. Do we want conservation represented by the technocrat and accountant, or do we want it represented by professional guides who are rewarded for employing imagination, creativity, and innovation in solving local problems?

One cannot discuss imagination, creativity, and innovation, of course, without acknowledging its antithesis: orthodoxy. Orthodoxy in the conservation arena comes in many different forms, but all forms represent a roadblock to any conservation journey. We encounter everything, from the “white-horse” environmentalist who foregoes critical thinking to the Panglossian bureaucrat who only sees the best of all possible worlds. Orthodoxy is also found when special interests hide behind the cultural icon of family farms rather than acknowledge the dynamic and diverse nature of our agricultural systems. Another form of orthodoxy is rejecting the very idea of regulation in the conservation arena (i.e., the “black-hat” thesis) without critical thought. Regulation can be very nuanced and does not have to be the “one size fits all” approach where we make all land users jump through regulatory hoops in order to get at the actions of a few.

If orthodoxy is all too common in the conservation arena, then it should be apparent why those who seek to guide others embarking on the conservation journey need imagination, creativity, and innovation. Leopold told us, “[T]he art of land doctoring is being practiced with vigor, but the science of land health is yet to be born” (Leopold 1966). In my view, pursuing the science of land health will only become possible when professional conservationists begin collaborating as

equals with those who know the land the best: farmers and ranchers. Creating an alternative path to help others develop the capacity to begin the conservation journey cannot be based on dogma or mindless repetition. Somewhere, somehow we must begin to support the imagination, creativity, and innovation in the conservation community to find alternative paths toward the science of land health. It is time to stop treating conservation as a commodity to be bought and sold between purveyor and customer. Let's forego always modeling our conservation efforts around the retail market and spend more time exploring where educational innovation can be integrated with the science and art of resource management. The conservation journey is all about a process that builds and encourages collaboration among partners who work as equals in seeking alternatives to

treating land as a commodity. Recognizing that neither land nor conservation is a commodity is just the beginning of any conservation journey. Now is the time to support and reward conservation guides who collaborate on solving resource management problems. Now is the time to exit the conservation super highway and begin thousands of conservation journeys.

---

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While the ideas in this essay are my own, they were enhanced and sharpened through the helpful comments and suggestions provided by the following individuals: Craig Cox, Senior Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Environmental Working Group, Ames, Iowa; Curt Meine, Senior Fellow, The Aldo Leopold Foundation, Baraboo, Wisconsin; Max Schnepf, Soil and Water Conservation Society, Ankeny, Iowa, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washington,

DC (retired); Jeffery A. Zinn, US Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC (retired). Their critical analysis helped me understand the shortcomings of my initial thoughts and thereby helped me realize that I have much yet to learn in my conservation journey. I appreciate the contributions of these conservationists to this essay and to our understanding of the need for a conservation journey.

---

### REFERENCES

Leopold, A. 1966. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*. New York: Ballantine Books, Random House Publishing Group.