

Challenge to Conservation

Peter's remarks at Building Collaboration gathering at Katahdin

There's so much wisdom in this room right now. There is community wisdom, scientific wisdom, traditional wisdom, political wisdom, ancient wisdom. The wisdom of peoples who have been on this land the longest, long before my people.

And so, I have a great deal of gratitude for that wisdom coming together here. All of you could be doing a million other things than being here. I'm a spoon carver, and the highest form of gratitude I can express to someone is to spend several hours carving them a spoon.

For my fellow planners ... Darren Ranco, Donald Soctomah and Maria Girouard, Ciona Ulbrich and Deb Bicknell. For the Chiefs who are here: Chief Sabattis, Chief PeterPaul, Chief Nicholas. Thank you all so much.

I have some aspirations:

I hope that 5 years from now there are 25 cultural respect and use agreements that have been signed between these conservation groups and these tribes guaranteeing Wabanaki access to fishing grounds, to harvesting black and brown ash, to holding ceremony, to protecting burial grounds of ancestors. In 5 years, I also hope we're involved with each tribe in one significant land acquisition or repatriation project to expand their stewardship of land. I hope that within 5 years, there's a trend well under way to return native place names to landscapes all over Maine.

I hope we're flowing money directly into tribal governments through our own fundraising efforts to build Tribal capacity to get that vision.

I hope we've given the time it needs and survived the inevitable mistakes and affronts that will happen, that we've slowly earned each others trust, that we've become strong, reliable partners.

I hope for these things selfishly, for ourselves, because many of us here believe deeply that Wabanaki prosperity and deep connection and use of this entire landscape of Maine enriches Maine immeasurably and enriches our conservation movement immeasurably.

The very beginnings of that future are already happening:

Some of us are working right now on mapping of hundreds of thousands of acres of our lands for the presence of ash and of the emerald ash borer.

Some of us are running educational programs for Wabanaki youth and fully engaging Wabanaki elders in writing the management plans of lands we steward.

Some of us are committed to loaning our funds help Tribes acquire land, and some of us have recently done that at Nibezun and also helped to raise those funds.

Some of us are working on public policy to improve tribal subsistence hunting rights.

Some of us are working quietly and steadfastly to see that return to the Passamaquoddy tribe of their land at Meddybemps Lake.

All of us here, I believe, are committed to doing much more.

To my Wabanaki colleagues here, I want to say this:

I know that access to a place, alone, is hardly sufficient and not worthy of congratulating ourselves. We **must** grant access on lands we steward and do much more.

Ceremonial access or access to harvest medicines and to protect burial grounds is a good step forward, but it is insufficient. I hope our relationship grows to the point where conservationists can help tribes to acquire land for their economic uses, whatever that economy might be.

Some Wabanaki people I trust and value have told me straight up that all of this is too little too late. They've questioned to what extent is this about satisfying guilt or for the entertainment value or bragging rights to a progressive landowner land owner to have Native people use their land. To what extent are we preserving or dismantling the needs of system that is broken and unjust? Those are all fair comments that I respect, that we have to prove are unfounded.

To my fellow conservationists, if we don't keep going forward with our learning and pushing this work to its logical conclusions about equity, we will be guilty of these statements.

I hope you can be especially courageous these two days. You have boards that you report to, I know, but what are you willing to do toward this vision of Wabanaki prosperity on the land? How far are you personally willing to go?

To our Wabanaki colleagues, please be clear and direct about how we might become stronger partners. Let us know when what you want and need is different from what we think. Let us prove out our commitment to this vision of expanding Wabanaki stewardship of land.