Hello. Well, how is the wild promiscuity going?

I want to begin by sharing a story that a friend of mine back in Northwestern Pennsylvania often relates and that motivated today’s thoughts: a story of 17th and 18th century mapmaking. You may recall from your grade school history lessons that in the mid-1600s, Spanish explorers sailed up the west coast of the Americas for the first time to a place now called the Baja Peninsula: a bit of land that juts southward from what, today, we call California. There is, as we all know, water between the Baja Peninsula and the mainland of Mexico – it’s called the Gulf of California. But what the mapmakers of the 1630s did was extend that body of water in a straight line north from the Baja Peninsula to Strait of Juan de Fuca, which lies between Vancouver Island and Washington State. And as a result, the maps that were published in 1635 – like this map - showed California very distinctly as an island.

Now, that would be only an enjoyable story if it were not for the fact that the missionaries of that time back in Spain were using those maps to plan their travels inland when they got to the New World. And – you engineers will love this - given the information on the early maps, they developed the world’s first, great, prefabricated boat building project. They manufactured flatboats in Spain, cut them apart, sailed them to North America in pieces and, on the ocean shores of California, put them all back together again to be transported by mules 12,000 feet up the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the other side of California, where they expected to find the sea that the mapmakers told them was there. But as we now know, on the other side of the mountains the missionaries discovered that there was no seashore at all. Much to their surprise they found, instead, what is now the state of Nevada and the beginning of the great American desert. California was the mainland!

Now, this is a rather entertaining story. But one additional fact makes it even more noteworthy. Because, when the missionaries wrote back to tell the mapmakers and the Spanish King that California was not an island, no one believed them. In fact, the people back home insisted that the maps were obviously correct and that it was the missionaries who were in the wrong place!

Even more astonishing, in 1701 - almost 70 years after their first map - the cartographers reissued an updated version of the same map. Those maps went unchanged year after year because someone in Spain continued to work with partial information, assumed that data from the past had the infallibility of tradition and then used their authority to prove it.

Finally, after years of new reports coming in from the Americas, a few mapmakers with vision and the courage to buck the crown began to issue a new version. And in 1721, the last cartographer holdout finally attached California to the mainland.
But this is the really unbelievable part: it took almost 30 more years for the new maps to be declared official. It wasn’t until the mid-century, in 1747, that King Ferdinand VII of Spain decreed that California was no longer an island. And all of this occurred despite the fact that the people who were there all the time knew differently over 100 years earlier . . . from the very first day.

The point of the story is this: Truth is always larger than the partial present, the infallibility of tradition and the declarations of authority. And vision is the ability to realize that. And if we hope to come out of these days together with any semblance of a vision about how to achieve sustainability through our work together, we had better realize where the truth really lies . . . and it’s not in Washington, DC, where we tend to work on the basis of partial information, endow ways of the past with an aura of infallibility and then used our authority to crown our assumptions as “true.”

Now, the Native peoples who lived along the waters of the Americas and the first Europeans to explore and settle in its valleys understood the relationship and the connection of their lives to the land and the water and each other . . . the sustainable connection of economy to ecology. While they may not have expressed it in today’s terminology, our ancestors knew very well that everything was connected, and that they had better pay attention to those connections.

But over time, we’ve forgotten those associations and severed human life from the natural that sustains it, to the peril of both. And as a result of our collective amnesia, for all of its greatness, the nation’s waters now flow through a fragmented bureaucratic and social reality, whose functions and structures are equally fragmented. And the fragmentation not only occurs spatially and institutionally, but temporally, as well. Federal budgets are developed in one-year increments. Congress turns over every two years; and the Administration and its agencies’ key leaders every four years or so.

These cadres of disconnected organizations and institutions that have evolved across the country and in Washington have ended up devising and implementing disjointed solutions based on incongruent and often contrasting missions and objectives. The infamous “silo” bureaucratic cultures have become entrenched at the state and federal levels. Fragmented mindsets and politically-driven schedules, exacerbated by limited resources, have lead to myopia when it comes to identifying issues of concern, planning solutions, seeking funds and applying them toward holistic, sustainable solutions.

As a result of this fragmented disarray, our NGOs, agencies, private stakeholders, states and other entities largely act as separate disembodied appendages, exhibiting little sense of direction, an insular set of priorities, and at best an incomplete investment from the communities they serve. Our public and private initiatives are not really driven by an overarching, all-inclusive vision. Our projects are not truly integrated. Our corrective and protective measures are narrowly applied and suffer from mission shortsightedness, even when occasionally couched in terms of systemic, sustainable solutions. Very striking is the fact that most efforts rarely involve members from the private sector to any significant extent – an element that is especially ominous, given that the overwhelming majority – about 70 percent – of nation’s land lies in private hands, and since all of the national sustainability issues relate to and solutions will impact private interests.

We’re following the wrong map, folks. No matter how well-intentioned or how fully-funded, this segregated approach to issue identification and problem-solving in the end will simply not be sustainable, and only end in disappointment, mistrust and finger-pointing. We know this from numerous past experiences, whose fragmented efforts resulted time and again in the establishment of multiple and often-conflicting goals and objectives, the filing of numerous court actions and appeals, significant and chronic delays, ambiguous and conflicting timelines, continuous implementation problems, distrust and frustration.
The systemic issues we face are multi-jurisdictional, multifaceted, intergenerational and interconnected, and none will be adequately solved, let alone understood, if our way of thinking, planning and doing does not also become multi-jurisdictional, multifaceted, intergenerational and interconnected. In fact, the natural resource problems we face will only be made worse by any isolated or myopic attempts at mitigation. Albert Einstein said it best when he wisely observed that “The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.”

In other words, if we continue with the status quo as a conservation approach or adopt an artfully massaged version of the status quo, we might as well retire, sit in our Lazy-Boy chairs and contemplate our navels. We’re simply wasting each other’s time while paying lip-service to integration, progress and sustainability.

Put more pragmatically, perhaps, in a time of extremely limited Federal resources and an even more limited Federal attention-span, how in the world can we expect the country to pay attention, make sustainability a national priority, and invest its limited resources toward sustaining economies, communities and natural resources, when the institutions designed to do that good work can’t get their own acts together?

Clearly, the timing is ripe to come up with a new map – a new model of conservation – a new vision – to restore and save the economic and environmental vitality of the country. And if we want that model to mirror the handful of successful efforts around the nation and world, I would suggest that our work be built upon integration and inclusion; a vision that has worked very well in the few cases where it’s been fully embraced and applied.

And it will work everywhere else, as well. Because social scientists have learned what we must now understand: that it is only the values that the group – the entire community - holds in common that will bind and drive people toward a sustainable goal.

Sustainable conservation has worked where the community has set as a common goal a revitalized, healthy ecosystem at the very center of community and economic renaissances, where all activities occur so as to protect and restore environmental richness and enhance the quality of life of all who live and work there. That’s a vision that values, conserves and revitalizes both the economy and environment; one built upon purposeful and meaningful integration across boundaries, and among people and organizations, forcing us to emerge from the trap of pursuing partial and incomplete solutions; generating creative, new ideas that actually work and breaking free of the traditional ways that don’t and won’t; creating a new basis for authority, grounded not so much in Washington, DC, or other so-called power centers, but rather in the nation’s cities and towns and rural areas, where the people who have been there all along have known from the very first day how to connect with each other and the land.

Such a lasting collaboration never happens on its own. So we all will need to collectively bring our effort, wisdom and skills to bear onto this existing, fragmented tapestry to help break down barriers, build bridges, and catalyze change; to bring people with varying backgrounds together to understand each other’s interests within an atmosphere of mutual respect; and to forge a common path forward. Otherwise, no matter how well-meaning the parties may be, when left to flounder within a fragmented status quo, either people never get together; or when they do, they speak but never really hear each other. Or if they hear, they sift what they think they are hearing through the filters of their own institutions, histories and traditions, and hear only positions - never getting close to understanding the other’s core interests and agreeing upon the values that the members of the group inevitably do hold in common; if only they would stop to listen.

Social science instructs us that to effectively do this in a system-wide, integrative and collaborative manner we will need to realize that the real capacity – the human resources and capital to accomplish sustainable
restoration and conservation - does not lay in Washington, DC, but in the promise of inclusive, regionally based, private-public partnerships. And ten years from now, as we come together to celebrate another decade of work, if we haven’t fully grasped that concept and meaningfully engaged everyone, then that work will have been for naught, and our celebrations hallow.

This is extremely difficult work. Because ultimately what this all entails is moving out of our comfort zones - our usual network of friends and peers, our usual way of doing things - to meet and greet and connect with and pay attention to and listen to others; finally understanding that everyone is a member of the economic and ecological quilt that makes up our communities, and that all have a critical voice to share and a vital part to play in their conservation.

Listening – real listening – is very possible. It has been done. And how are we to listen? Once upon a time, the story goes, a youngster asked an elder that question. And the elder advised, “Become an ear that pays attention to every single thing the universe is saying. The moment you hear something you yourself are saying, stop.”

I can promise you this: this could very well be the most challenging work we’ve undertaken in our professional careers. But as essayist Leon Rosten wrote, the purpose of life is not to take the easy route, but to matter; to have made a difference that you lived at all.

So, as we leave this summit, my hope is that we do so intent on making a difference.

And if along the way toward making that difference you get frustrated and worn down by the walls of authority and bureaucracy, keep going. Why? Because the truth is always larger than the partial present, the infallibility of tradition and the declarations of authority.

And if others tell you that this just isn’t the way we do things around here, keep going. Why? Because as Albert Einstein once said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

And if the good folks in Washington, DC won’t listen, tell you that they are obviously correct and that you are all in the wrong place, keep going. Keep telling them that the old maps are mistaken. Embrace a new vision of sustainability. Why? Because history is clear: if the people will lead, eventually the leaders will follow. Thank you.