

METCALF FOUNDATION

Healthy Lands - Southern Ontario Meeting

7 December 2005

National Ballet School

BACKGROUND

On 7th December 2005 the Metcalf Foundation hosted a meeting for those associated with the Southern Ontario component of its Healthy Lands program. The list of invitees included current and potential grantees, advisors, and a few “friends of” the Foundation. The meeting was intended to bring together people and organizations working toward the health of Southern Ontario’s natural and working lands to discuss current issues, opportunities and challenges; and to animate the Foundation’s Healthy Lands Program and learn from one another about the approaches, strategies and synergies of our work.

The structure of the meeting was purposefully loose in order to facilitate as much round table discussion as possible. While the meeting began with comments from three of the Foundation’s advisors, the majority of the time was devoted to open discussion.

OPENING REMARKS

Three of the Foundation’s advisors – Nina-Marie Lister, Stewart Hilts and Marcia Wallace – were asked to begin the meeting by animating the program. They were asked to address the following questions: What are the big natural and working land issues in Southern Ontario as you see them? What are the opportunities inherent in the Healthy Lands Program to respond to those issues? As a result of the change we can help effect, where would you like to see us in 5 years?

Nina-Marie framed her thoughts around whole-systems thinking:

- The conventional way of talking about landscape issues, especially in southern Ontario, has always been predicated on binary thinking. We conserve or develop – not both
- This logic is derived from scientific, deterministic thinking. It leaves little room for creativity and an inclusive approach to solutions
- We need to ask the right questions, in order to find answers appropriate to the scale and nature of our problems
- In 5 years we should be talking less about the environment and more about the people working in it

Stew spoke about the dire state of agriculture maintaining that:

- The farm sector is in the throws of collapse with farm prices at an all time low
- It is difficult to have dialogue between farmer and urbanite
- We need to understand the viability crisis in agriculture
- In five years, will we have incorporated a concept of a working landscape (incl. food production) into our vision for the southern Ontario landscape?

Marcia spoke predominately about planning policy and implementation:

- Good policy is informed by the challenges we see on the ground. If we are going to address the important issues, we need cross-jurisdictional solutions at multi-levels of government
- A finer mix of players, interests and ideas can step into the implementation space and rethink flexible and innovative solutions through creative alliances and connections that aren't traditionally obvious
- Policy development is moving into a practical space with new tools being introduced soon by the government – how people use those tools is only bound by the limits of their imagination
- In 5 years we need to find a bridge to help people understand how they can solve practical challenges. How do we get a wider breadth of groups and projects engaged and build their capacity to participate?

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The spectrum of perspectives from the conceptual to the practical covered in the opening comments provided a provocative and useful platform for response. The following represents key themes that emerged from the roundtable:

1. state vs. civil society

Throughout the meeting participants raised the question of the role of civil society organizations. Some key messages we heard included:

- Civil society “is doing all the thinking and innovation”
- The increasing role for civil society organizations is problematic since civil society organizations are unrepresentative, unaccountable, and signal an abandonment of government's role in protecting the public interest
- The increasing role for civil society organizations is an opportunity for NGOs to play a dynamic and creative role and have more of a collective voice across the voluntary sector
- We need to use NGOs to push government to govern, build accountability and representation

2. scale

A question that emerged repeatedly was at what scale do we most effectively engage in the work? Some thoughts on this theme included:

- The work must take place on a local scale - it needs to be done “in bite-sized pieces, more locally than the greenbelt scale”
- If you work at too large a scale, you can't have meaningful conversations during which you “learn to listen on a local scale to people who think about resource use conservation very differently”
- We need to invest more directly in the communities themselves so that the research questions are being framed by communities themselves, not a surrogate, incorporating economic development and social capacity
- Caution was noted against only focusing on the geography - when we only focus on the local we can lose sight of bigger picture issues - “we can start there, but not end there”

3. representation

A number of times participants brought up the issue of representation. Participants came at it two ways:

- The environmental movement is largely homogenous and privileged. We are undergoing significant demographic and generational changes. How do the issues in Southern Ontario engage youth? How do they engage new Canadians?
- How representative are our approaches to the issues? “It’s not just about trees and bunnies anymore.” We need to reevaluate how to incorporate thinking about the agricultural sector, energy costs, climate change, social justice etc. We haven’t yet digested how these issues interconnect and influence our work

4. dialogue

There was a lively discussion about dialogue. Some key points we heard included:

- Social progress can come through a clash of values “where some win out and others don’t” but that doesn’t mean we should shy away from that sort of polarization
- It’s about thinking about the problems in new ways and inviting everyone to the table. It’s not about environmentalists reaching out to farmers, for example, but having a “bigger rethink” where locally you build trust, ask what the challenges are, then create a truly open conversation about it.
- True dialogue is about engaging conflict, not avoiding it. It’s about understanding the nuance between overcoming polarity vs. getting rid of polarity
- We are moving into “post-modern environmentalism” which is transactional based vs. value based

5. other thoughts

Some other thoughts about engaging in the work were raised, including:

- The need for monitoring and holding governments accountable
- The need for “cheerleading” – emphasize success
- We must take risks and foster a culture of experimentation
- We need to understand the difference between fighting to win versus fighting for the truth – a spirit of solution finding not trying to win
- We need to test substantive projects that exemplify integrated thinking, e.g. ALUS
- We need new skill sets in organizations to deal with challenges, team work, diversity in partnerships
- We cannot look at these problems only through one lens but must be sensitive to the larger context of the issues, so that change can last and won’t get undone.

5. the role of funders

Some suggestions emerged about the role of funders in supporting healthy natural and working lands.

Thoughts on this topic included:

- A diversity of approaches is needed as there is no magic bullet. Funders need to support an array of strategies and “push grantees to recognize the full scope of how they understand their landscape and issues”
- Foundations are instrumental in enabling people to come together to “convene to think and talk” and in incubating connections between groups
- The most powerful opportunities lie in investing in people, not products. Empower humans to manage themselves, rather than to manage the environment including time to think. Support people with exciting ideas with money to innovate and conduct experiments
- Foundations can leverage funds and opportunities, e.g. federal granting programs that match industry money - governments should also match foundation/charitable money.
- We need to work at universities to push them to interact more with the non-government sector
- Foundations should think about being more proactive by requesting project proposals from grantees or groups of grantees around issues, rather than just reacting to what comes in

WRAP-UP

There was a discussion about whether groups wanted to meet again and if so, how and to discuss what topics. There was a clear desire to continue the conversation and take advantage of the opportunity to convene. Some liked the loose agenda and appreciated the ability to talk both conceptually and practically. Others were interested in focusing on more “concrete” issues. It was agreed that the Foundation will aim to organize another meeting in 6 – 8 months.