



Building a Movement to Reconnect Children & Nature

Children and Nature Network Grassroots Gathering
Natural Leaders: Growing Youth Involvement

Thursday, September 18, 2008

Sessions One & Two

Juan Martinez, Sierra Club, lead facilitator

Brother Yusuf Burgess, C&NN Board

Martin LeBlanc, C&NN Vice President and National Youth Leader, Sierra Club

Page Lambert, C&NN senior associate, recorder

Bullet-Point Summary of Outcomes

- Create social network of Natural Leaders
- Expand this network by reaching out to 5 youth leaders (Junior Natural Leaders)
- The Junior Natural Leaders would reach out to 5 uninvolved youth (youth pool)
- Create a Youth Resource Map on the C&NN website where young people can go to find out about regional activities and how they can become involved
- Objective is to go back and touch junior leaders to keep the outdoor movement going
- Focus on how to amplify the youth voice by creating a 2009 Youth Summit
- Natural Leaders will be a steering committee for this Summit
- Summit goals include: provide information to connect youth with nature; outreach to new, younger members; and professional development
- Remember that Natural Leaders have the ability to motivate others
- Work together to create a strong network of resources
- Be effective resources for one another
- Keep elders involved by using elders as resources
- There should be a trickle-down and trickle-up of knowledge (funnel it from the elders down, and from the youngsters up)
- This first NL meeting served as a great opportunity to get to know each other and keep the communication going beyond the conference

Follow-up Agenda

- A conference call will be scheduled for some time in October
- Board Member Martin LeBlanc will email 3 optional dates to everyone for this call
- Focus of call limited to setting objectives for the first Annual Natural Leaders Summit
- Natural Leaders will begin preparing their individual "youth pool"

Natural Leaders Meet to Discuss Youth Involvement
C&NN 2008 Grassroots Gathering

Article by Page Lambert
Author, Speaker, and C&NN Senior Associate

“This felt like the place where I could come and listen, a place where social change might happen. You guys are like a single nervous system in a powerful new body.” ~ Alexis Sanford, participant

“When I was thirteen, I was tricked into caring about my community...Now, I trick kids into caring about nature.” Ernesto Pepito, 2001 Crissy Field Center
Community Hero

More than twenty participants of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds gathered for two afternoon Natural Leader sessions during the C&NN conference in Nebraska, contributing creative ideas about how the group might move forward in their goals to involve more youth in the “leave no child inside” movement.

Juan Martinez, lead facilitator and Natural Leader, informally addressed the group. “Su familia,” he said, “My family...you are all leaders, hand-picked, nominated to be in this room. We’re about to create something new that hasn’t been done before. Magic. The work that all of you are doing is amazing...Let’s make this a collaboration – it’s going to be organic.”

During the brief introductions, Juan shared that he had grown up in a little town in Los Angeles called South Central. In and out of trouble, a detention officer eventually sent him to an Eco Club, where he decided that if he planted jalapenos, he could make salsa. That eventually led him to the Grand Teton Nature Science School for a two-week trip.

“I fell in love with nature,” said Juan. “I learned that it wasn’t about escaping, it was about returning to my community to see what could be done. I’m about empowering people, my people, any people who struggle. It’s not about environmentalism for me. It’s about empowering people to believe.”

Martin LeBlanc, Vice President of C&NN, also helped open the first session. “A lot of the people connected with the movement are baby-boomers, they’re not youth, not like this group,” said Martin. “I don’t think there’s ever been an opportunity before for the youth who are doing great things to come together and figure out a way to empower more youth to be leaders in this movement. It’s easy to keep the conversation going – we could have a Facebook page up tomorrow. We can showcase the opportunities that are available if you get involved – figure out a way to provide career and professional opportunities for young people.”

Other participants introduced themselves with a wide array of diverse experiences, each enthusiastically sharing their different programs (complete bios are available from C&NN).

Kina Murphy, an impressive former Fulbright scholar who worked in Southern Africa for eight years, now works with inner-city youth taking undergraduate students to work on conservation projects. Alexis Sanford, who works with nonprofits, let her instincts lead her to the Natural Leader’s session. “This felt like the place where I could come and listen,” she said, “where social change might happen. You guys are like a single nervous system in a powerful new body.”

Krista Bustamante, originally from Idaho, was a crew leader with AmeriCorp doing conservation work in Utah. She helps to get multi-cultural groups out in nature while also helping their economic lives grow. “I work with Hispanic youth,” said Krista, “many who at the age of fifteen are responsible for taking care of their families.”

Maya Quintana, of the Zia and Cochita Pueblos in New Mexico, joined the Sierra Club’s Building Bridges to the Outdoors program two years ago, where she went camping for the first time. She has now given three speeches about the experience and was personally invited by Richard Louv to attend the C&NN conference. Her aunt Sylvia accompanied her here from New Mexico.

Tyrell Hughes, a charismatic young leader from Albany, New York, involved in the Men Organized to Lead movement, said, “I don’t focus just on the environment. I run a program called MODEL. Our primary focus is mentorship... we take the kids camping, on college tours, we serve as examples. All of us here, now, can start implementing change because we all have influence.”

Ernesto Pepito, born and raised in San Francisco, told the group, “When I was thirteen, I was tricked into caring about my community.” This comment brought laughter from the group. “I got paid twenty dollars a week to clean up parks. Little by little, it started to seep in what I was doing. I did two years with AmeriCorp and that’s when it became a passion for me. Now, I trick kids into caring about nature.” More group laughter. “I don’t actually spend time caring about nature,” he said, “it’s really all about the kids. Nature is just a tool. I hope to be tricking people for a long, long time.”

Katrina Ellis, from East Palo Alto, California, goes to Howard University in Washington, D.C. “This summer, I hosted a Green Force Conservation crew,” she said, “eight, inner-city youth. We took them into the national parks and did environmental work. They learned about the environment, and they got paid. Now, they’ve hired me on to do four crews next year.”

Aekta Shah, from northwest of New York City, told the group she grew up “Where there were fields and cows, so I had nature around me all the time. After high school, some friends and I converted a school bus that ran on bio fuel and drove around the country. That converted *me* into an environmentalist. Providing access is important to me – merging this into an environmental justice movement.”

Everyone appreciated her play on words. Then a dynamic young woman, Akiima Price, one of the few African-American urban environmental education specialists in the country, introduced herself. She really didn’t need to, for during an earlier panel that morning attended by all the conference participants, she gave an impressive presentation which resulted in resounding applause from the audience when she described her work at the New York Restoration Project. She’d already made a fan of everyone of us, and her presence was welcome at this Natural Leader’s meeting.

Tamara Wendt, a Natural Leader who grew up on the coast of Costa Rica, helped Mexican students in Colorado as a Project Coordinator for the I Have a Dream Foundation for five years. Now, living in Michigan, she’s involved in supporting the For Generations to Come Sanctuary, and is launching a new blog, “52 Ways to Fall in Love with the Earth.”

“I’m interested in inspiring ways to live life,” Tamara told the group.

Sara Thurston, a creative consultant for Hooked on Nature living in Los Angeles, came to sit in on the Natural Leaders’ meeting. “I wear a lot of different hats,” she said, “and I see a lot of social disconnect everywhere.”

Tara Arthur, a Natural Leader and athlete from Virginia, worked as a mentor with The Nature Conservancy encouraging students to get into conservation. She also worked with the Haitian Sports Foundation. “I’m very interested in social change,” said Tara. “How you know it’s happening, how it’s playing out nationally and internationally.”

Daniella (Donna) Drader, originally from Romania, has lived in the U.S. for a long time. “I worked with Roots and Shoots, on the board with local Groundworks group,” she said. “My main objective is to network. Groundworks is putting together community network dinners, farmers, professors, students, etc.”

Heather Marks with the Teton Science Schools in Jackson, Wyoming, who also came to sit in on the meeting, said during introductions, “I’m actually sick of talking to regular adults about this. I’m excited to hear what adult youth leaders have to say.”

After introductions, the group headed outside, circled up on the grass in their bare feet, and, with Juan leading, participated in a spontaneous “ice breaker” game that loosened everyone up, got the blood flowing, and brought on smiles and more laughter. The second session, back inside, began with a comment by C&NN vice president LeBlanc.

“The Children and Nature Network was not created to be another organization,” he reminded everyone. “The whole idea is for it to be a network, a place to connect, a place for all of you to start a dialogue. The Web site is being updated to allow us to be more interactive. This will mean that all of us who met here can stay in touch. We’re going to do a summit, and we want the Natural Leaders to create it.”

Brother Yusuf, a C&NN board member and dedicated professional who exposes young people to the natural world by taking them camping, boating, hunting, fishing, hiking, and on skiing excursions, kept a low profile during the introductions. During the second session, he spoke up.

“The young energy that is here in this room is great – it’s a movement. But to sustain it and keep it up depends on what happens after here. Don’t hold back, any of you. Add whatever it is you want to say.”

“I want to help us stay focused on three things,” interjected Martin, “Empowering youth and identifying opportunities; working on how to create this virtual network; and starting the process of talking about the Summit.”

Juan, the meeting’s Natural Leader facilitator, asked, “What is a natural leader? It’s someone who has been outside and shows leadership potential. The task of the Natural Leaders is to create a youth leadership structure within C&NN. The “Leave no Child Inside,” or the “C&NN movement,” you rarely see youth talking about it. We can make that happen.”

Kina Murphy, the former Fulbright scholar, saw things a little differently. “I see the opposite. I see a lot of activity happening among the youth, you just don’t see it on the Today Show.”

Kina’s comment led to comments on the role of the Natural Leaders as mentors.

“Leading by example,” said Tyrell, the leader from MODEL. “At first, the kids Kina worked with weren’t interested in trees, they were interested in her. We’re mentors. We mentor kids into nature.”

“Would that make us EnvironMentors?” joked Brother Yusuf.

Everyone laughed, then Akiima spoke up. “Maybe we need a training course, face-to-face, to help Natural Leaders deal with the social circumstances we’re going to find, the cultural differences.”

“We need to be ‘reaching and teaching,’” said Tyrell, “empowering the young people to speak on being involved.”

“It’s important to know when to step up,” Juan encouraged, “and when to step back. I want to hear from all of you guys in this room.”

“It’s also important to talk about where the kids we’re trying to reach are coming from,” reminded Krista, “what their characteristics are. If you’re talking to someone from Idaho, you won’t connect by talking about rap music.”

Ideas volleyed back and forth, then Juan asked, “What will it take to start getting more youth into the C&NN movement?”

Martin LeBlanc reminded the group, “We have the structure – the Web site – but we need ideas for the structure.”

Ernesto wasn’t sure about focusing on structure. “I’m not convinced that that’s the way we should spend our resources.”

“I personally don’t want to spend more time on the computer,” agreed Kina. “We have these online groups and we end up emailing each other endlessly.”

“I have a comment,” said Donna. “Virtual Ecotourism. In Uganda, tour guides go out and take you around a virtual landscape and you can ask questions directly of the guide. It’s a good experience because you’re online, you’re inside, but you’re also outside. If there were a way in your own town or community to create a ‘virtual tour’ of your own area...”

Sara, the creative consultant, commented. “Whenever I join a network, I wait to see if it’s active. You have to trick them [young people] to be engaged. You have to get them excited. What about documenting their area, where it automatically uploads? You want it to be an execution.”

“Could we say,” asked board member LeBlanc, “that if we create some sort of virtual community, it has to be fun and engaging, but has to lead to real world interaction and participation and asks the question, engages the audience?”

“There are so many social networks,” said Kina. “Instead of creating a new one, can we tap into one that already exists?”

That led to more discussion. “But at the end of the day,” said Martin, “we’re trying to develop youth leadership which will lead to the Summit, cast a wide net through interaction.”

Also present during both sessions, but sitting in the back of the room, was Barron Orr, a C&NN member from Tucson, Arizona, who works to bridge the gap between Earth systems science and technology at the University of Arizona. “If you put those ideas together,” he suggested, “you might consider something that spins off from this....If all these youth are connecting with nature in some way, maybe you can have a contest. How do you connect with nature? Use Natural Leaders to judge. Invite those who respond to the Summit.”

More discussion ensued about how to connect more young people to nature, and how the Natural Leaders might reach out and encourage more young people to become involved. Then Kina challenged an underlying belief that seemed to be swaying the discussion: that kids must be tricked or cajoled into getting involved.

“We’re consumed with this idea,” she said, “that *we* have to get kids connected. What if we get the kids who *already* are connected, and ask those kids to help get other kids?”

The idea immediately struck a chord.

“But how do we do that?” asked Martin.

“One way,” suggested Tara, “would be to go into the places where these kids are. A lot of them already do community service work - you could go to their schools and ask them to get involved in the Leave No Child Inside movement as community service.”

“How many children are involved in the campaigns that we’re all involved in?” asked board member Brother Yusuf. “Let’s get a cross reference going – find out what it is that we’re doing here in this room, all of us. Find out what we’re all doing and how many kids we’re impacting. Write-board it and make a list. We need to know who’s in the room, and what they’re doing.”

“If you look around the room,” said Tyrell, “you’ve got all the strategic pieces right here. How are we going to involve the other people? We can develop that along the way. We’ve already got the important people here in the room – we can continue to dialogue after this weekend. What’s a program that you’ve been doing with your kids that’s been working well? Tell us. We’ve got all these resources right here.”

“A tangible thing,” said vice president Martin, “would be to create a list serve and then cross pollinate.”

Comments flew around the room as the dialogue became even more energized. Someone interjected, “I don’t see the point in communicating around the world. I think it’s more important to connect locally.”

“When I get back home,” said Tyrell, “I’m going to lead a community clean-up drive... We need to be able to share the things that we’re doing that are working.”

“Say someone goes to Facebook, and clicks on Los Angeles,” said Martin, referring to the earlier idea about creating a Natural Leaders Facebook presence, “and they see six or seven different events going on, listings from the Sierra Club, etc.”

But Sara, the web technologist, said, “Facebook is very flash-in-the-pan. People forget what they read quickly. It could let people know about our presence, but it’s not sustainable. I think Facebook should be a ten-percent focus but it shouldn’t be our total focus. There has to be something that engages people. Catch them on a service level, then engage them. Create layers for people who want to go deeper.”

As the afternoon discussion progressed, the group talked about Natural Leaders providing incentives – perhaps job sites, events, resources, information on how to create environmentally friendly neighborhoods – incentives that would encourage young people to go to this site. Toward the end of the meeting, Richard Louv came in quietly and sat down, listening.

“We need something that is run by youth, facilitated by youth,” said Kina. “Let’s take kids who are already involved. Ask them to ‘map your bike trails, map your skiing trails.’ We’ve got to get *kids* bringing in other kids. I have a daughter, and the kids at her school – if they think something is cool, then she’ll do it. I think we need some sort of ‘kids circle’, not us trying to get them involved, but the kids leading the effort.”

With the allotted time for the meeting drawing to a close, Juan said, “We’ve got to take a step forward today. We’re looking for answers today. Something tangible. Something we can leave here with today.”

“Here’s an answer,” said Kina. “I’ve got a bunch of kids who are mountain kids. I’ll get these kids together, you get inner-city kids, maybe we create pen pals. Get the kids who aren’t engaged to network with kids who are. Not us communicating, but us linking the kids to one another.”

“Taking people in our age group,” added Akiima, “we could create a specialized Summit, just for that, to bring the people together to have workshops. If we had a guide, maybe create something like ‘Project Take a Kid Outdoor’ and if we all got trained – give it the same name. Create t-shirts, Hats. Maybe use Project Wild as a model, create our own training program. We would create the guide, train the people on our list serve with this guide. Brand it. Eight or nine months from now we’re actually having this Summit. We have this blueprint to share. We’ve got an excel spreadsheet with everyone’s name and addresses. It’s powerful to go around and walk and talk with people, have our own breakout session.”

Richard Louv spoke up. “The best leaders should not be people like me. They should be as diverse as possible. Young people – teens and college students – kids getting young people outdoors. We need to ask how young people can be leaders in the whole movement. How can people who look like me be the leaders? Old people like me are only so good at getting kids outdoors. Ultimately, only young people can get young people outdoors.”

“What is your group,” asked Yusuf, addressing the Natural Leaders. “What does it look like? How can you bring them to this group? How can you increase that number?”

“Get video cameras to the kids who are on these adventures,” suggested Richard. “Take them to the local TV stations, the kids doing the filming, get the kids suggesting that parents can start a Family and Nature Club.”

“You set the tone by modeling,” said Sara. “If we can set the tone by modeling – document and show, start with that blueprint of examples, first you model, then they get excited, then they get engaged.”

“What about YouTube?” asked Richard. “You guys could have your own program. I said to the head of Sesame, ‘There is no modeling. What about a program This Old Tree House – show it made by kids, they find the lumber, they build the tree house, they talk about, use it as their outpost from which they would go outside and have adventures.’ The Sesame producers liked the idea.”

“We need to come up with some concrete ideas,” reminded board member Martin, “ways to keep this group connected.”

Barron Orr spoke up again from the back of the room. “Let’s summarize: Your goal, probably, is that the Summit serves as the place to get the information you need to connect kids to nature. It should have three components. One, professional development. Two, all of you would have to find more of you. And three, you probably have to find your 5 or 10 best younger people to participate. And it’s not about what they’re going to learn, but what we learn from them.”

That idea, too, struck a chord.

“If we all bring our best ten young people,” responded Ernesto, “teenagers, there would be more of them, less of us. We would just be there to support them, to facilitate them.”

Martin steered the talk back to a quick discussion on the Summit. “We could bridge social networking with the Summit. The ten best can start the conversation electronically, then when the Summit arrives, everybody meets face-to-face. The First annual Natural Leaders Summit could start by all of us bringing x-number of youth, under 18, together at the Summit. Use social networking to engage that.”

“So perhaps there are three parts to the Summit,” said Barron. “The young part, invite your own kids – these could be the junior natural leaders. Expand this group by one or two each. Then prepare to elicit ideas from these young people. Maybe there’d be one piece of the

conference that is for professional development for the older Natural Leaders. A big aspect of the Summit would be to also focus on being EnvironMentors.”

The group concurred. Adult Natural Leaders could bring university students. College students could bring high school students. High school students could bring middle school students, etc.

“For kids,” said Richard, “it should be all about just getting out and having fun. It’s important not to skip the stage of young people just having fun outdoors. For college students, it’s learning about the environment. But for kids, it’s different. I wouldn’t want that distinction to get lost.”

“On the Nez Pierce reservation,” said Donna, “there’s actually a cultural rebirth happening.”

Then, a CSU educator on natural resources who had come in with Richard Louv asked a question. “What is it you need in order to be the leaders? What kind of professional growth? Maybe a survey could go out ahead of the Summit asking ‘What do you need?’ It could be an annual thing ushering in a whole new crop of leaders. First crop, second crop, germinate, never harvest...”

“In Wyoming,” said Heather, “at the Teton Science Schools we’ve been thinking about how to do these concentric rings. Youth summits for the national forest, youth summits for the state, local communities that connect, that kind of thing.”

Martin explained briefly that because of funding, a national summit might have to showcase starting from the top down, but regional summits could showcase what’s happening at the local level too. “One objective of the Summit might be to create local summits. If a national summit could lead to regional summits, then the regional summits could get the local young people involved.”

“To reiterate what everyone’s been saying,” said Juan, the facilitator, “it sounds like a social network wants to be created so that we can all stay linked. Through that network, we can then create the Summit. We want to bring other youth in, get them involved, learn from other groups, expand this group, and do professional development.”

This dialogue led to the consensus that it was important for the youth to lead, but to have elders participate as resources for the youth. “Bridging the Gap” became a common theme.

“Junior leaders will be looking to us to serve as models,” said Juan, “but we as the Natural Leaders can go to our resources, like Rich, and take these ideas to the Junior Natural Leaders. The goal is to get the young kids here and find out what is on their mind.”

“Getting the ten most interested kids,” suggested Brother Yusuf, “maybe ten boat builders, or ten skiers. Not necessarily ten environmentalists. Then they get their five best, then maybe five not-so interested.”

This suggestion got positive nods and enthusiastic “oohs and aahs” from everyone as they realized that this could create the mentorship and help to reach the groups who are not yet engaged.

“If we know and can list the kids we’re impacting,” Brother Yusuf continued, “then ask these kids to bring kids – it would be peer to peer. Then at the Summit, these kids would have the care and custody of the kids they brought in as far as relaying information, helping them at the Summit, that kind of thing.”

The suggestion was made that the Summit must have a keynote speaker, or someone inspiring, to attract people, and that it should be held at an outdoor venue. It was also

suggested that there could be networking roundtables within the Summit, have elders “as we’re calling them now” come to the tables, switching off every so minutes. “Kind of like speed dating.” That brought another round of laughter.

Then C&NN vice president Martin asked, “What is the best way we can keep you guys connected to this? How can we practically keep you guys, the Natural Leaders, engaged in this once we leave here? What is the best system?”

A discussion on “what it means to be engaged” ensued, which led to a brief discussion of “practical engagement,” the actual planning process for the Summit – the who, what, where, and when logistical details. But the question remained, *How are we going to communicate?*

“If we can’t even shoot somebody an email,” asked Tyrell, “how do we expect to keep these kids connected?”

“So if the goal,” asked Martin, “is to meet this time next summer, would all of you be willing to participate in a conference call next month if we send out an email next week about it?” There was agreement in concept to this idea, subject to the next set of comments.

The question of funding was brought up – was there enough funding to bring natural leaders and youth leaders to a summit?

“To bring everyone here? Yes,” answered Martin. “This will happen.”

Using a list serve to communicate was discussed, as well as possibly creating a writeboard on the C&NN website so that everyone could communicate via that site. It was agreed that the first conference goal should be very limited and very focused, with maybe three themes, keeping in mind the objectives, and the outcomes wanted. The conversation should be documented and archived.

A suggestion was also made that there should be a separate page on the website with a map where a young person could click on his/her state and the resources for that area would come up – a map specifically for the youth, perhaps a Youth Summit Preparation Map.

With only a few minutes left in the second afternoon session, board member Martin asked, “So, what came out of today? What are our ideas, the next steps? Here’s the practical stuff: First, we want to create a social network for the Natural leaders; and second, we identified the goals of the Summit: create the network, expand the network, focus on professional growth, have it be an inspiring outdoor experience, and we want it to keep people engaged.”

Barron Orr, sitting in the back of the room, summarized a few of the things that had been discussed. “You want to create an email list of everyone’s contact information; you want to use the C&NN website for a Youth Resource Map that would be created by the Natural Leadership group, with content generated by youth, about youth-based projects involving nature and young people.”

“Here’s our outcome, then,” said Juan. “Have a conference call in October. Limit focus and goal of the conference call to setting objectives for the first Annual Natural Leaders Summit. The next step is to prepare our individual youth pool for the Summit.”

“Also,” someone added, “we want to look for non-traditional participants – let the involved youth identify who the non-involved kids are.”

The response was “peer-to-peer,” but with caution. “Teachers are also a great resource,” someone added, “because they’re interacting day-to-day with these kids.”

“I’ll throw out maybe three dates,” said Martin, “and hopefully the majority will have a date that works for the call.”

Additional outcomes from both sessions were summarized as follows: 1) Create a social network of Natural Leaders and expand this network; 2) Create a Youth Resource Map on the C&NN website where young people can go to find out about regional activities and how they can get involved; 3) The Natural Leaders group is actually a steering committee for the Summit of 2009; 4) Focus on how to amplify the youth voice by creating the Summit and bring them there; 5) Remember that Natural Leaders have the ability to motivate others; 6) Objective is to go back and touch junior leaders to keep the outdoor movement going; 7) Work together to create a strong network of resources; 8) Be effective resources for one another; 9) First session served as a great opportunity to get to know each other and keep the communication going beyond the conference; 10) Expand the Natural Leaders network; 11) Keep elders involved by using elders as resources; and 12) There should be a trickle-down and trickle-up of knowledge (funnel it from the elders down, and from the youngsters up).

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