

NELF Lunch Chat Discussion

May 19, 2020

Topic: Using Scenarios and Signals to Update Strategies, Plans, and Actions

Takeaways:

1. Signs of hope include more people outside biking, using trails. Sustaining increased connections to nature beyond the pandemic will require planning and action.
2. Increasing broadband, widespread remote work, and a trend of people leaving large cities for smaller cities and towns, plus people moving from rural areas to towns and small cities in northern New England, may lead to increased development pressure in towns and small cities. Scenarios can help with planning, and this is an important window of opportunity for action.
3. Local planning boards are the nexus where education on the value of natural lands meets the pressure to develop for tax revenue. Planning boards work with communities via town meetings to align priorities including development, conservation, revenue. Scenarios are useful for working with planning boards and towns to confront new pressures and make plans that prioritize livable cities and forest conservation.
4. As we use scenarios for land conservation planning, we need to expand the green infrastructure conversation from street trees & green roofs to encompass intact ecosystems such as riparian forests as green infrastructure.

Next Meeting:

Tuesday, June 16 at 11:30a

Notes:

Resources

NELF Signals Google Doc: bit.ly/nelf-signals

NELF Scenarios: bit.ly/nelf-stories

[NPS Climate Change Scenario Handbook](#)

Discussion Prompts

Prior to the discussion, people were invited to consider their goals and activities in the context of the following questions (adapted from the National Park Service):

1. Will your current strategy succeed should the world turn out like...
 - a. Go it Alone?
 - b. Connected Communities?
 - c. Growing Global?
 - d. Yankee Cosmopolitan
2. What are the most urgent actions to take in the present moment?
 - a. Are there any current actions that you will stop taking?
3. Should you:
 - a. Gamble on what appears to be the most probably outcome?
 - b. Prepare a strategy to deal with several contingencies?
4. Are things so open that you can try to shape the future? What can you do to create a future that is more aligned with your vision, mission, and goals?
5. What aspects of your strategy should you keep under review?

- a. What are the indicators to monitor to decide whether your plan is working, or how and when to pivot?

Discussion Summary

The conversation opened with discussants introducing themselves and describing something that is giving them hope:

- The warmer weather and other changes of spring was a common theme:
 - More people gardening than ever before
 - Taking kids away from screens and into the woods to catch toads
 - Getting outside and seeing so many others outside enjoying themselves
 - Hope that the increased use of outdoor areas can bring about a change in how we relate to our natural systems
 - Watching neighborhood trees and shrubs change each day
 - Longer days and more sunshine
 - Lilacs in bloom in southern New England! Coming to northern New England soon!
- Others are feeling hopeful from the positive changes in lifestyle that have occurred:
 - Kids are on the loose in ways they haven't been for a long time
 - Seeing more bikes on the street
 - Hope it will lead to permanent transportation changes
 - Cities are closing streets to cars and are considering making those changes permanent
- The response and adaptations to COVID are also bringing hope:
 - Hope that social policies being discussed and implemented for COVID response (e.g. providing housing for the houseless) will endure past this crisis
 - Campgrounds are opening in Maine – hope the kids can attend
 - By navigating the current crisis, hope we can emerge better prepared to handle future challenges
- Discussants also drew hope from hearing about what is giving hope to others

Marissa then provided a quick refresher on the [NELF scenarios](#) and the [signals](#) we have been mapping, noting the signals can be from the news or from your experiences. The discussion opened by asking if people had changed anything about their strategy or identified new, urgent actions to take:

- The NELF scenarios are compelling because they show how much work is left to be done and raise questions of how much voluntary, private land conservation can accomplish
 - Development planning has to play a role (i.e. keeping it out of rural areas)
- How will the current crisis effect the recent balance of development and conservation within communities?
 - Will developers be looking for new opportunities since construction is down?
 - Will economic uncertainty affect whether people are willing to donate land?
- A collaborative in the Saco watershed is engaging municipalities to try to get them to update their bylaws, using NELF to paint the picture of what their community could look like
- Long-term changes could be happening:
 - Broadband access for rural communities
 - People realizing most jobs can be done remotely
 - Aversion to dense living situations

- This happened after 9/11 too – it would be interesting to see if there was an enduring depopulation or not
 - At the same time, rural depopulation is still occurring. This was studied and confirmed in analyses showing migration from northern to southern Maine.
 - Worry that current situation could exacerbate this.
 - There have been challenges to infill development in the southern cities that are increasing in population – tough to balance keeping nature in cities with densifying.
- The combination of improved broadband access, more acceptance of remote work, and aversion to dense living could enhance the vitality of struggling rural communities but could also be problematic for land use in those areas.
 - “Growing Global” not around Boston but instead through sprawl and pockets of development everywhere, including northern New England and still-rural parts of southern New England
 - Southern Maine may be squeezed by rural depopulation from the north and urban depopulation from the south
 - State support is needed to help rural communities manage these changes
- Need to help cities realize that nature is valuable within their borders
 - Connected Communities could be further fleshed out to show the beneficial connections between cities, farmlands, and natural areas
- Local planning boards are the nexus where education on the value of natural lands meets the pressure to develop for tax revenue
 - Long process – need to convince the boards, then the boards have to convince the town at town meeting
 - Turnover and term limits also make this education a constant process
 - Difficult to convince people to increase density in the appropriate places
- What actions seem important to *stop* taking?
 - Green infrastructure focuses on street trees rather than protecting intact forest such as on riparian corridors. Would be great to see the GI conversation expand from street trees to intact ecosystems.
 - Related to the challenge of convincing cities that nature has value in cities
 - Developers, engineers, landscape architects use the bare minimum to be able to say they are doing LID
 - Need to educate them and push to use the full suite of LID techniques and more than one BMP