

VNRLI Brain Trust
Building Diversity in Virginia's Natural Resources Professions
White Paper – March, 2015

What is VNRLI?

The Virginia Natural Resources Leadership Institute (VNRLI) is a nine-month program whose mission is to develop leaders in the Commonwealth who can help groups involved in contentious natural resource issues move beyond conflict towards consensus building and collaborative problem solving. VNRLI is comprised of six three-day sessions held throughout the state, targeting environmental issues specific to the host region. Founded in 1999, VNRLI is a partnership of the University of Virginia's Institute for Environmental Negotiation, Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech, the Virginia Department of Forestry, and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Participants, or Fellows, in the program are environmental professionals representing a wide array of employers, including industry, small businesses, nonprofits, state agencies, academia, etc. During its fifteen-year history, VNRLI has graduated over 360 alumni.

How Did the VNRLI “Brain Trust” Begin?

Each year during the final session, Fellows participate in an exercise using Open Space Technology (OST). The goal of an OST meeting is to create space and time for people to engage creatively with important issues that are selected and developed by the group.¹ During the OST segment of the final meeting of the VNRLI Class of 2014, the Fellows discussed the lack of diversity within Virginia's field of natural resources. Though the discussion was limited by the time constraints of the meeting, the class agreed that this issue deserved greater attention. Additionally, the Class of 2014 believed the issue was of such significance that it merited finding a way to engage the knowledge and experience of the VNRLI alumni network in a larger discussion about how this problem could be addressed. The idea of leveraging the collective skills of the alumni network became known as the “Brain Trust”, a term coined by one of the Fellows and immediately embraced by the class.

Coincident with the final meeting of VNRLI's Class of 2014 in June, the VNRLI faculty team was in the process of planning for an alumni engagement event to be held in August, 2014, made possible by a grant from Merck & Co., Inc. The faculty agreed that the engagement event would provide an excellent forum for a larger discussion of the diversity issue raised by the Class of 2014, as well as piloting the idea of the Brain Trust.

¹ Chris Corrigan, “What Is An Open Space Technology Meeting?”, <http://www.chriscorrigan.com/openspace/whatisos.html>. Accessed March 27, 2015.

Diversity: Challenge for Virginia's Natural Resource Professions

Statistics suggest that VNRLI Fellows were correct in their assessment that there is a lack of diversity within the natural resources field. A 2007 report by Marcelo Bonta and Charles Jordan, "Diversifying the Conservation Movement," acknowledged that "Our diversity crisis is a systemic problem", and so requires a systematic approach to address the issue.² Their recommendations include creating cultural change within organizations, utilizing partnerships and collaborations, engaging young people through environmental education programs and positive work experiences for students of color, and connecting the generations in a way that would allow current leaders to mentor emerging leaders.

A 2014 study by Dorceta Taylor on the state of diversity in environmental organizations (defined in the study as NGOs, foundations, and government agencies) found that gender diversity has improved within environmental organizations, but the gains have gone mostly to white women, and men are still more likely than women to hold leadership positions.³ However the most popular diversity initiative being undertaken within organizations is the promotion of women already working in an organization. The study also found that racial diversity in environmental organizations lags far behind gender diversity, and that members and volunteers of the organizations studied are predominantly white. While many of the organizations expressed a desire to diversify their boards and staff, few had taken the step of forming a diversity committee and/or hiring a diversity manager.

Organizations who participated in Taylor's 2014 study reported that the biggest barriers to hiring minorities are few job openings and lack of minority applicants.⁴ However the study found that environmental jobs are still being advertised and new employees recruited in ways that introduce unconscious biases and facilitate the replication of the current workforce. For example, recruitment frequently occurs through word-of-mouth and informal networks, which makes it difficult for anyone outside of traditional environmental networks to learn about job openings. Additionally, environmental organizations generally fail to use the internship pipeline effectively to find minority employees.

In background research for this white paper we consulted numerous employment databases, including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but were unable find a statistic to accurately reflect diversity in Virginia's natural resources field.

The August 2014 alumni Brain Trust event was held in Staunton, VA and included 32 participants comprised of VNRLI alumni and faculty. Following a morning skill-building

² Marcelo Bonta and Charles Jordan, "Diversifying the Conservation Movement", 2007. http://cdeinspires.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/diversifying_conservation.pdf. Accessed March 27, 2015.

³ Dorceta Taylor, "The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations", July, 2014. http://diversegreen.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/07/FullReport_Green2.0_FINAL.pdf. Accessed March 27, 2015.

⁴ *ibid*

session on advanced facilitation with Dr. Jayne Docherty of Eastern Mennonite University, the participants turned their attention to diversity. The discussion began with a panel on “Increasing Diversity in Virginia’s Natural Resources Field” with Leanne Nurse (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, VNRLI 2001), Dr. Gregory Frey (U.S. Forest Service, formerly of Virginia State University, VNRLI 2013), and Dr. Paul Winistorfer (Dean of the College of Natural Resources & Environment at Virginia Tech). Following the panel, participants utilized OST to generate ideas about improving diversity in Virginia’s natural resources field. Following the OST segment, VNRLI faculty led a discussion about the ideas that were generated by the group. These ideas are presented below.

Challenges to Increasing Diversity in Virginia’s Natural Resources Professions

It is important to understand the barriers to successfully addressing the problem of minority inclusion in natural resource professions in order to begin to find solutions. Some of the barriers identified by alumni are: institutional racism and its effects; the lack of exposure to natural resource fields within minority communities; the fact that "the right people" (i.e., minorities) are often not part of the conversation/problem solving; and the natural resource field itself is not huge, so opportunities are fewer than, for example, in medicine or business. Also, diversity is just one of many formidable issues our society is facing now -- so it can be difficult make headway when other issues (poverty, climate change, etc.) are the focus of attention and resources. Finally, lack of diversity is being exacerbated by the growing economic divide in our country. Many in minority groups are focused on economic survival and may not see how natural resource fields offer opportunities to "get ahead." However, beginning steps in addressing the issue may be more likely to succeed when "local champions" are identified and cultivated to help problem solve and spread the word.

Question for the Brain Trust: What policies and programs could help cultivate these “local champions”?

TMDLs: A Tool for Engaging Diverse Communities

The TMDL program in Virginia has a required public engagement component, which has experienced mixed success. Because the larger issue of minority engagement in natural resources issues also touches on environmental justice issues, one alumni idea is to build upon existing infrastructure like the VA TMDL program and the Chesapeake Bay Agreement, identify the commonalities, and develop recommendations so that greater engagement of African-American, Latino, Native American, veterans, disabled, refugee, and other minority and other underserved communities can be accomplished by better using the tools currently available. Most importantly, issues involving human health matters (bacteria with water recreational use; toxics in fish) are easy concepts for engaging people. Once engaged, people may begin to realize the opportunities for the entering the natural resource professions.

Underserved communities (not necessarily all minority communities) tend to focus on survival matters. A focus on human health concerns impacted by natural resource issues is a natural tool to promote increased engagement. While not comprehensive, the TMDL is an important tool that is funded and also requires public engagement. With a little retooling, the TMDL program could become something more than it is currently and help bring more people into the fold.

Question for the Brain Trust: What could be done to use the TMDL program for increasing outreach and engagement to underserved populations so that they could become interested in natural resource professions?

Youth: Cultivating Interest in the Natural Resources

Increasing outdoor education and recreation opportunities for minority youth would help to create a connection with the natural resources field that could develop into a professional pursuit. Ideas for increasing these opportunities include outreach to churches and scout groups, incorporating outdoor skills in our educational curriculum, hiring Spanish-speaking employees within the Parks system (or encouraging existing employees to learn), and funding for field trips and outdoor hands-on learning. Another approach would be to seek opportunities to educate parents and children together, to foster a long-term family connection with natural resources.

Question for the Brain Trust: What can you do, personally or through your programs, to try some of these ideas?

Education: Include Objectives for Environmental Literacy in “Inclusion.”

Recognizing the value of outdoor education, we should incorporate environmental literacy inclusion objectives into Virginia’s classrooms. “Inclusion” is a distinct goal from diversity but it supports the goal of diversity by creating an inclusive environment that fosters creativity and innovation. This would require working with teachers and school systems to offer professional development opportunities around teaching outdoors and inclusive leadership skills training. This could also be an opportunity to integrate service-learning for students, and an avenue for involving the corporate community in sharing their expertise with students.

Question for the Brain Trust: How can “inclusion” be fostered in Virginia’s classrooms as a core part of environmental literacy?