

Connecting the Dots: A Holistic
Approach to Saving Rivers of the Americas
By Stacy Timlin

Abundant, and sometimes conflicting, environmental and social justice groups speckle the hillsides in the conscious city of Portland, leaving many of the mindful overwhelmed, but for Peter Lavigne, founder of the Rivers Foundation of the Americas (RFA), the ultimate solution lies in providing connections between these groups and others throughout the world.

In less than two years, Lavigne, an activist and environmental lawyer, has established RFA as a resource for community-based groups involved in river protection. His vision is to support the work of different local organizations to the same degree that their issues are united on a global scale.

A longtime river wanderer from his boyhood in New Hampshire, Lavigne has advocated for rivers since his days at Vermont Law School. He equates rivers to the “veins and arteries” of the ecosystem, resulting in RFA’s systems approach to protecting and restoring rivers.

During work on one river project, RFA may involve groups focused on human health, population stability, social change and indigenous rights, in addition to those devoted strictly to biodiversity and clean water. Looking at the big picture allows RFA to come up with innovative solutions that receive broader support than traditional environmental approaches, he said.

“If you are going to protect rivers and their functions, you have to deal with the use of land in the watershed,” said Lavigne. “People really think about river protection generally when they think about factories discharging or runoff from agriculture [but] the point of entry to the river is basically the end of the pipe; it’s not where it starts. Where it starts is how we deal with uplands, how we deal with the headwaters areas, what kind of development we do and where, and its ultimate effect on the river system.”

The challenge of the systems approach is that people in our society quickly make connections that are one or two steps, such as seeing the drainage into the water, he said. It is harder to make connections to significant land uses many miles or even continents away. “People do, however, instinctively understand the connection of environmental degradation to clean water, and to human health. We build on that understanding and link those concerns to the importance of thoughtful stewardship of wilderness and biodiversity – the grand diversity of plants and animals on the earth so critical to every life on earth” says Lavigne.

For instance, who would guess that threats to the salmon-rich Copper River Delta in Alaska, one of RFA’s project focuses, are tied directly to the Columbia Gorge and the Willamette rivers? The connection makes organizations such as the Willamette

Riverkeeper a natural partner for groups more geographically tied to the Copper, said Lavigne.

Likewise, the threat of development of the Copper River Delta can be traced down the Pacific Coast influencing whale reproduction patterns as far as Baja, Mexico and bird migration all the way to Tierra del Fuego.

An Unnecessary Clash: Enviros vs. Natives

RFA projects involve working with underserved communities including indigenous peoples and developing democracies in Central and South America, and Tribes and First Nations in the U.S. and Canada.

While Lavigne admits that there are a number of instances where traditional environmental approaches and native peoples clash, he says they don't have to. "We believe there is a tremendous synergy between indigenous rights and cultural practices and long-term environmental protection," he said. "If you believe, as we do, that local people provide one of the keys to protecting natural resources and local people can help make those connections on a global basis, then you can't ignore indigenous peoples."

Lavigne first had his eyes opened to the importance of working with native communities in Quebec and again in Bolivia, where he was impressed with the expertise of local organizers and their commitment to protecting their birth lands, despite limited resources. "Native peoples have taken the brunt of industrial expansion for centuries. We believe that there are enormous social and environmental wrongs that need to be addressed."

During RFA's work on the Copper River, traditional environmentalists have often disagreed with the group's holistic approach, preferring to focus exclusively on environmental issues. RFA has worked to assist the Eyak Preservation Council to protect the ecosystem as well as native rights and practices through the establishment of a Native Lands Conservancy. "I have seen a lot of missed opportunities to protect and restore ecosystems due to efforts to by-pass working with indigenous efforts," he said.

Creating an Effective Non-Profit

Lavigne's "big picture" approach to river protection is not only appealing to advocates, but also to would-be donors interested in seeing their cash used for long-term change rather than temporary band-aid solutions.

RFA selects river basins throughout the Western hemisphere based on connections to other water issues; the resonance of the issues with the public; the passion of the regional groups and individuals and their willingness to work from a systems approach; the significance of the resources being protected and restored; and the ultimate outlook for success in the long run (although Lavigne says he relishes taking on seemingly intractable issues.)

Currently RFA has three major watershed focuses - the Copper River watershed in Alaska and the Colorado River watershed in the U.S. and Mexico, in addition to many issues it works on in the Pacific Northwest. It plans to announce additional strategic watershed designations over the next few months – including the gigantic Great Lakes-St. Lawrence river watershed and the Paraguay-Paraná basin in South America.

For organizations dependent on the vocal support of local communities and the goodwill of major donors, it takes more than good intentions to transform enthusiasm into action.

While the group's stated mission is to provide new sources of funding and other forms of assistance to organizations in carefully selected regions, a short visit to its modest headquarters on SE Milwaukie, shows that RFA has its hands in many other river-related projects of note both around town and around the world.

In less than an hour one finds Lavigne alerting the press to the death of a renowned river activist and friend, giving a press interview on RFA, and meeting with Northwest river protection performance artist Peter Donaldson to discuss his new play *Salmon People*. Later that day Lavigne is involved in conversations regarding federal attempts to weaken the Clean Water Act, talking with international trade policy experts in Minnesota re globalization and water policy, and putting together a proposal for a North American Water Policy Forum to be held in Portland in 2004.

It is no surprise that Lavigne, whose vision is to preserve clean water, biodiversity and human health in the Americas, boasts a rolodex of 2700 contacts. Networking has been key to his successes throughout the years, he said. "connecting people and resources is a driving force."

RFA strives to create a non-profit "culture of results" versus a "culture of sentiment," he said. "A lot of organizations measure their success by process – by the number of mailings they do, the number of hearings they attend, or the number of members they have," he said. However, it is important to remember that those are only tools, not the end goal. RFA asks all of the groups it works with to measure results by changes in action and behavior.

One common mistake he sees is deciding on one solution, and sticking to it despite new opportunities and knowledge.

While RFA has trimmed down its short-term endowment goals given the turn of the economy since its inception, Lavigne is still optimistic about the organization's fiscal situation. "We [as a society] still have a lot of discretionary resources," he said. "How we use those resources shows what we value as a society."