

**Interview with Pete Lavigne of The Rivers Foundation of the Americas**  
**By Emily Pollard**  
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**EP: I did look over your web site and I want to ask, in your own words, how do you define the goals and mission of Rivers Foundation?**

PL: The mission is to provide new resources to groups that support major rivers and watersheds. Within that we've got some subsets of goals that include spending a majority of our time supporting indigenous organizations; working with groups that integrate biodiversity, clean water, human health, sustainable populations goals in their work and making those connections.

All that's just a way of saying that we work with people who use systems approaches to environmental problems, not just work on end-of-the-pipe problems, but work on root causes - some of which are not traditional environmental efforts - making the links between healthy environment, healthy humans, quality of life and vice-versa: the lack of biodiversity, lack of good quality of life. Polluted ecosystems lead to a lack of good quality life and poor health. But most environmental groups don't deal with connections, and as a result, they miss a lot of communities.

**EP: Yeah, I definitely got that flavor when I was more reading more in depth on your web site, that that's how Rivers really differs from most of the traditional ecological non-profits out there. Now when you say "new resources to groups," what do you mean by new resources?**

PL: Money, technical advice, policy advice. Just all of the above really.

**EP: When you say "advice", do you act as a mentor, spending a lot of time in conversation?**

PL: Yes, that is a lot of what I do. Last week is a good example. We had a bunch of folks from Copper River here Thursday and Friday. They had a big meeting with EcoTrust to try to work on a land deal that that they're trying to pull off in the Copper River Delta. We spent the better part of two days helping them get materials together, helping them strategize for this meeting, which is involved in getting support, convincing EcoTrust and the Moore Foundation that the Eyak Preservation Council and the Native Conservancy are worth giving \$5 million dollars to buy this land on the Copper River Delta. So we provided a lot of support for that. It's all behind the scenes stuff; EcoTrust and the Moore Foundation don't even know that we've been doing it, and it's critical to the Native Conservancy being able to pull off this deal.

**EP: Is the trip that you're doing this summer, is that a fundraiser?**

PL: It's partially a fundraiser, it's partially educational, it's also a time for me to go up and spend some time with the folks that we're supporting to see what's happening on the ground and get a better feel for what their needs are. So it's a combination effort. Last Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were taken up with those meetings, helping them get some publications together, political strategy, etc. And then Monday and Tuesday, their new executive director passed through town and I spent quite a bit of time talking with her about where they are organizationally, what the needs are, and what she needs to spend time on in her first year on the job. That's typical of what we do...working with that on the Copper River.

I also work extensively with the Glen Canyon Institute on the Colorado; we've got a number of events coming up the next couple of months, we're going to have a conference call Board meeting next Monday to deal with some legal strategies, fundraising, the Ed Abbey reunion event that's coming on May 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Just by e-mail, I've been consulting with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis re: some of the things that we want to do on water policy on the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence.

**EP: How are you introduced to these groups? Is it you who gets in touch or do they get in touch with you?**

PL: Mostly we go after them; we're proactive. I find people that we really want to support. Because we don't have much in the way of cash, we don't advertise what we're doing very much because we don't want to get inundated with requests that we can't meet.

**EP: This is a question at the core of what my class is about: how would you define sustainability? It's one of those really elastic terms that sort of fits the purpose of whoever's using it. How would Rivers Foundation define it?**

PL: I guess first I'd say it's one of those terms that's thrown around all the time without a lot of thought. I think for me it means sustaining biodiversity, a decent base level of quality of life for all species (humans included), potable water supply for everybody, adequate shelter, that sort of stuff. There are larger ethical concerns about use of resources, distribution of wealth, responsibility for stewardship. Those are ultimately ethical, political, and management issues, none of which we deal with very well as a species! More than one-sixth of the world's population hasn't got access to potable water on a regular basis with the United States using upwards of 300 times more resources than the average citizen of Bangladesh. Those are the things we badly mismanage.

**EP: It sounds like you're leading into my next question, how Rivers Foundation works towards sustainability. I can see how the goals you explained already of Rivers Foundation fit into this.**

PL: We're very concerned about obviously ecosystem health but also the ethical and political management issues that link into that, both to the human communities and to the larger ecosystem. One of the ways we choose to deal with that is to focus a lot of our effort on providing assistance to support indigenous organizations and indigenous rights, protecting traditional uses, etc., mostly which tend to be more in long-term accord with ecosystem health.

**EP: I agree. We've been reading a big book with lots of different essays called Indigenous Traditions and Ecology, where every essay takes you to a different place in the world. I've seen that the various groups don't make that separation between the way they live and protecting the environment; it is intertwined.**

PL: Given the relatively small resources that we have, we have a very large vision. One of the most important things in environment work, or any kind of work really, is figuring out where the leverage points are. Where's the fulcrum that you can use to make big changes with relatively simple resources? Our Copper River work is providing support to the Eyak Preservation Council to help them accomplish the goals of protecting this magnificent wilderness while also preserving the Eyak language and preserving their ancestral homeland.

**EP: So in other words, where you see you can make the most direct impact is working with indigenous groups?**

PL: Yes. We want to replicate what we're doing there in other watersheds. We're beginning to do that on the Colorado working with the Glen Canyon Institute on the restoration of Glen Canyon, the Grand Canyon, and alternately, trying to provide more water to the Colorado Delta. We've just begun to identify indigenous organizations and cross-border opportunities in Mexico. We haven't had the resources to do a significant amount of that yet, but we're looking to that in great detail.

**EP: With an eye to move into South America as well?**

PL: Yes, in 2005 our goal is to start working in the Pantanal, the world's largest freshwater wetland. It's under enormous threats from a major international development scheme called Hidrovia. Basically Hidrovia wants to channelize into canals and dams and dikes, ostensibly for economic development – it's more like economic destruction. It's about the least sustainable approach I can imagine.

**EP: What do you see as the intents of the organization (RFA) over the next year and then over five years?**

PL: Well, over five years we want to simultaneously provide support to organizations in ten major watersheds throughout the Americas. That's the long-term goal. We also want to raise a significant endowment so we can provide direct cash assistance to these organizations, which we haven't been able to do yet, at least in most cases. Raising an endowment, hiring some staff... There's a lot to be done, we've got a long way to go. Speaking of different levels of sustainability – this organization isn't sustainable the way we're operating it.

**EP: What are the major stumbling blocks?**

PL: Just lack of staff, lack of money for staff. That's probably our biggest issue.

**EP: Would you say that's owing to the economic climate more than anything or is it tough in general calling money to things like this?**

PL: It has been tough the last couple years; it's starting to loosen up. We've also spread ourselves pretty thin, which is sort of my own inclination and habit, perhaps a strategic mistake with the economics of the last couple years, but you win some, you lose some.

**EP: So you'd say personally you've been taking on a lot?**

PL: Yes.

**EP: I was reading your bio on the web site, and I was really intrigued. Your experience is really impressive. It mentions on there how you spent a number of years traveling around awarding grant money and working with different leaders. From that experience and with your experience here with Rivers Foundation, what sort of qualities jump out to you among these leaders for sustainability? What do you tend to see?**

PL: I've found over the years they do have a shared number of characteristics. One, they have broad visions. Two, they tend to be detail oriented. Some of them are very charismatic, not necessarily, but

they have an ability to articulate a vision, to engage people in that vision and carry it out. Those are three very different sets of skills and to find them combined in one person is the tricky part. That said, often one subset is weaker than another so the people who are successful are able to bring others who complement their own skills; expand on them.

I think the other part of it is people need to be mission-driven because this is what they believe in; this is what they want to do with their lives. When people came into this with a vague notion of helping or doing some good or just gaining some different experience, well, that's all useful, but it doesn't tend to last. The kinds of changes we're trying to instill are long-term efforts. So that's probably the key lesson about any of this is that environmental protection is about societal change. One, consciously face that, and two, realize that that takes time and skill.

**EP: And we're such a short-term thinking society.**

PL: Particularly in this culture, yes. So, those are heavy hurdles.

**EP: Do you see yourself as a leader? That might seem like an obvious type of question! What do you see as your strong points; what do you see that might be missing?**

PL: My biggest strong point is that I'm a connector and I bring a lot of knowledge of people and issues together. That's my best role to the extent that that enables building networks and movements.

**EP: Can you give a brief example; what do you consider an accomplishment?**

PL: The easy example is while I was at River Network. My title was Director of the River Leadership Program. The mandate was to go out and create something that would expand the scope of river watershed protection throughout the U.S. The strategy we decided on was to build statewide river organizations that did two things. One, that set some policy leadership for the state or the region/large watershed that they were working in. Two, to be a resource center for local and regional organizations.

I spent a couple of months with Mark DuBois' help doing an analysis of what was going on state by state in the U.S. At the time we started the program there were six statewide river organizations, two of which I'd already had a hand in and we decided that part of what was needed was to get a bunch more of these statewide river groups. We revised the book, provided technical and organizational resources for local groups, but also articulated some policy leadership to those in the states and the regions that they were working in. We assessed the state of river protection activities in the states; we picked about a half dozen the first year to focus on; made trips out to the states to start talking to people about what we identified in our survey – “Ok, what do you see as the need statewide? Who do you think would be an individual who'd be willing to take this on; build an organization; build infrastructure that we've identified as necessary?” We'd provide them with a little bit of money, technical assistance, that sort of thing, and help to get the organizations up and running.

Well, after three years of doing that, we went from six to 18 statewide organizations and half a dozen in process. According to our surveys we went from roughly 1200 local groups to about 3000 in the same period. It all came together, just as I was leaving River Network, when we gathered together. We had a first meeting of the statewide executive directors. That was really fun because what happened there was the creation of a national network, a national movement. The groups could see what I'd been able to see for years because of all the travel I'd been doing and all of the talking to people. There were many similarities in the issues throughout the country. There was a lot of work that was being done which was useful for other areas, and there's always a tendency in every state, region, whatever scale you're working on that what you're doing is the first and best time that it's been done and that you have to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel. What we were able to see is that

there was a lot of similarity between river protection work in Pennsylvania and Idaho, for instance, because they were both dealing with a lot of mining activity. The person in Idaho had said, well there's nothing in the east that compares with what we're dealing with here and there's nothing that can be gained from hearing from them. But getting them all together in the same place for a week, trading stories, doing some very structured training, and a lot of informal time made a huge difference in how these groups related to their issues and resources and approaches. That's carried on in the River Network doing the annual river rally with upwards of a thousand people attending each year. That's pretty phenomenal, I think.

**EP: That seems to be a strong point for you, making those connections and then enrolling others into seeing your vision. What do you see that it takes to enroll others in a vision of sustainability for healthy watersheds? Turning people around; causing a paradigm shift in their daily lives?**

PL: That's at the base of what we're trying to do. It's something I've been thinking a lot about lately; I'm getting very frustrated with the way we've been doing environmental work and environmental law for the past 20 years, particularly the last 10. If anything we're going backwards from a protections standpoint. I do...let's see...

**EP: I know; it's a big question!**

PL: It's a big question, but it's also a critically important question. I'm alternately encouraged and discouraged. I see things that are going on here in Portland like the various green building initiatives, the planning / land use efforts that are happening and I'll get encouraged. Then I also look at that even in the Portland area we're scratching at the surface, and in many other areas in other places I look. And ultimately, does it make a difference when we're still adding each year to the globe? The U.S. is the only major industrialized country that's still got massive population growth – in exactly the place we don't want massive population growth. I think there needs to be a lot more work done on those issues – sustainable human population levels - and we're nowhere near that society-wide. You know, other areas of the world are really, at least subconsciously, getting it.

And I think part of that is a direct recognition that quality of life is tied to population. In the United States we tend to think that economic growth means base population growth; that more people is a good thing over the long haul. It's not hard to see that by any objective measure that's not a sustainable approach.

**EP: Well, how do you enroll people into thinking sustainably? How do you be a leader that way when it's clear that unsustainability is the modus operandi in this culture?**

PL: Yeah, it sure is. I haven't found a magic wand. I think that part of it is message development and the way we try and get the message out there. One example – last week there was a big article in the Oregonian about a sewage cleanup project that the city's undertaking on the Willamette. The work that's being done is in large part due to the lawsuit that Northwest Environmental Advocates filed in 1990-1991 forcing the city to take a look at how it could start cleaning up the sewage overflows. The city's going ahead with this, spending a billion dollars trying to eliminate 100% of the overflows on the Columbia Slough and 94% on the Willamette. And instead of praising the city for the work it's doing, congratulating it on this huge effort that's being made, Northwest Environmental Advocates keeps complaining about how they've got to do more. That's without any acknowledgement about how far we've come and what we're doing. Part of it is you've got to recognize the good things that are being done, encourage people...

**EP: It just sounds so self-defeating...**

PL: Yeah, it is self-defeating, and it misses opportunities to take them to the next level because you could say instead, "Hey, you know this is fantastic, how about we work on improving it even more." That's a much more enrolling message. If the response is, "Well, screw you, we're already doing enough," then you can go back to, "You're really not, and if you don't work with us on the next steps then maybe we do have to sue you again," or something. But there's not even an effort to do this enrollment conversation.

**EP: I can even see that on a small-scale level with Jeremy (my boyfriend) and I in our daily lives. His family, for instance, I wouldn't say that they're ecologically minded and yet if we were to be constantly on their backs and making them wrong for every little wasteful thing they do or because they're not going to the Co-op or this and that, it would be so self-defeating. I was talking to Jeremy lately about enrolling his parents in starting to buy organic seeds for the garden instead of regular old Fred Meyer type of seeds they buy. He had a conversation with his mom, and even though she'd already bought the seeds, she went and returned them and got organic seeds instead. Where he was coming from was praising her for the type of advice she had already taken in the past from him. So I think you really do have to be positive about the little steps that people and organizations are taking.**

PL: It makes a huge difference.

**EP: Otherwise, it sure doesn't give them much impetus in the future if it's always about what they're not doing or how much further they have to go.**

PL: Exactly. If you can do it that way, you can get a lot further a lot quicker. With that said, there are times when you need to squawk. That's part of what I wrote about in this big paper that's coming out in a couple weeks is that while cooperative efforts are good; they don't happen in a vacuum usually. There's no question that a lot of the cooperative efforts that are being done wouldn't be there at all without the enforcement structure of the system of environmental law that we put in place 30 years ago. There's a constant tension there, but the reality is that we haven't used incentive approaches as much as we could. We haven't done a good job of praising people for what's been done and then enrolling them in the next steps.

In part it comes down to, in the U.S. at least and probably in most areas of the world, the low level of public knowledge and understanding about basic scientific concepts, about systems approaches, about interconnections... You know, we live in a very reductionist, simplified world. We design our economic structures from that viewpoint and that means that we assume that you can't eliminate waste, we assume that you can't have closed loop systems, that you can't have something that resembles a dynamic ecosystem that makes sense.

One of the best concepts I've heard is from the Eyak Preservation Council. When people ask about development in the Copper River, which is a wilderness system; they like to say, "We already think of it as very highly developed as it is." That's a viewpoint that's foreign to the way we do business in this culture.

**EP: Yes, we have an entirely different definition of development.**

PL: Exactly, and I like that phrase because it begins to give people a different view, or give them access to a different view. That's the key, how do we use language? What I do in my Watershed

Strategic Planning course now is very different from the way I did it four years ago. What I did four years ago...

**EP: Is that at PSU?**

PL: Yes, it's actually coming up again at the end of April. What I did four years ago is I taught all the standard things, who do you need to have involved, what do you need to do, what components of a strategic plan are important for a watershed...typical standard planning methodology and how it applies to trying to put together an ecosystem protection plan or restoration plan for a watershed. I started to realize that there are hundreds of watershed plans that have been developed that sit on shelves and never get implemented and you really don't see the systemic change in those watersheds as a result of the planning that's been done. What's missing is the social change aspects of ecosystem restoration or protection.

You know, it's that definition of insanity - keep doing the same thing over and over again while trying to get a different result. Well, we've been doing the same thing over and over again for 30 years and we're getting the same result and we're wondering why. So I changed the course pretty dramatically; it's now titled differently, it's Watershed Strategic Planning, Action and Social Change. The content is extremely different than what it was in part because we already know about the basics of ecosystems and how land use affects water from other courses in the series and we know the basics of environmental law, but what we don't know about are principles of community organizing and how to accomplish social change, what types of people are important. That's a very different question than "who are the stakeholders".

**EP: And also where are people at right now...what listening are you speaking into right now?**

PL: The text for the course is a wonderful book - The Tipping Point... (reaches for it from a bookshelf)

**EP: I read that a few years ago! That's a great book.**

PL: That's what I use for Watershed Strategic Planning - The Tipping Point. It starts with examples of how different activities cause sudden change; it's basically epidemic theory applied to social change. What is contagiousness in terms of social change or social activity, human activity? Rather than disease vectors, how do you turn an *idea* into an epidemic by creating a tipping point?

Then it goes into the rules of epidemics and the law of the few, which is basically get the right types of people in the right place. He divides this into three categories: Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople. It goes back to what you were asking me - my role in all of this is I'm a Connector and a Maven. I know lots of people, lots of places to make connections...However, I'm not a particularly good Salesperson! What I need to add to this operation is a good Salesperson. Then there are different factors, as the author says, the stickiness factor, what makes an idea sticky so that people can remember it and pass it on? It goes into basic advertising concepts...

**EP: I remember the "broken window theory" made a big impression on me and we even talked about it in one of my sociology classes last term.**

PL: When you look at marketing, which is something we don't deal with very well in terms of environmental work, but when you break marketing down to what makes an idea sticky - what's the law of the few, who are the three different types of people that you need to turn an idea into an epidemic, what's the context that you're working in and how you use that context to translate those

ideas, that's the way I teach the course now. And it's a very different course; hopefully it will create different results.

**EP: Did you teach it this way last year?**

PL: This'll be the third one.

**EP: This is great. Jeremy has talked to me before about how there are a lot of different ecological organizations that are all pursuing very similar things and they often lose the people aspect. The whole social change aspect, that's really where my interest lies because if you get to the hearts of the people, you can really make anything happen.**

PL: That's what it's all about.

**EP: What are your wildest imaginations as far as what you'd like to see Rivers Foundation accomplish; your own personal vision? What is that broad vision you've been speaking of?**

PL: (long pause) I guess my wildest imagining is that we could take the resources of the Foundation, both people and financial, and leverage those resources to create massive societal change. To have it be an everyday thought that an optimal human population is something substantially less than it is now, that there can be clean drinking water, good shelter, clean air, healthy lands for all peoples, and that by providing that we can then provide the opportunities for people to use their skills and interests and creativity in productive ways.

And that we create not just a sustainable economy, because I don't like that terminology. I like to think more in terms of a generative society, a generative economy; the concept of fecundity, of richness, diversity in ways that sustainability doesn't quite evoke. That is the big vision, and it's not a utopian vision by any means, it's really "let's do what we say we can do". Set up a universal declaration of human rights and extend that a little bit to give people the right to potable water as it's necessary for life. Out of that, create a cultural commons that includes stewardship of the earth, in a very different way than we've done for the last 2000 years.

**EP: What advice would you give someone like me who has over the years shifted more towards thinking this way, for going down this path?**

PL: There's something I have a hard time following: approach all of this with a sense of humor and a lightness in step. (chuckles) Now if we can keep a sense of humor about it, have some fun with it, we're more likely to get more accomplished over the long haul.

It's one of the things I've learned from Dune Lankard, who's the head of the Eyak Preservation Council - he just has fun. He's dealing with some potentially very depressing scenarios: the survival of the Eyak people, the survival of their language, which is past critical condition right now. There are only about 200 Eyaks left and only one person is a native-born speaker of the language and she's 85 or 86 at this point. So there's a lot of things that could send him into a straitjacket very quickly if he'd let it. But he has this incredible joy about how he approaches this work, how he approaches life. Not to say he's a Pollyanna; he does have his down times, but on balance he likes to have fun with this - it's a game.