Colby Magazine

Volume 93
Issue 2 *Spring 2004*

Article 7

July 2004

Far and Near: The conservation movement is taking hold in unexpected sectors, and Colby Alumni are at the forefront, from Tanzania to Maine

Sara Blask
Colby College

Far and Near

The conservation movement is taking hold in unexpected sectors, and Colby alumni are at the forefront, from Tanzania to Maine

There was a time not so long ago, says Sharon Treat, when environmental initiatives almost always took the form of mandates handed down by lawmakers. Green was merely a color, not a movement. Business and industry saw environmentalists as the enemy—and vice versa.

Times have changed. "I think that what we're seeing is an evolution in how people think about the environment," said Treat, a former environmental lawyer who now is environmental studies coordinator at Colby and majority leader of the Maine Senate. "Now we're really into a phase where people have incorporated a lot of this into their own lives, more than what they do on a day-to-day basis in their own houses, but also in business and education, whatever their field may be."

Businesses are moving ahead with their own environmental initiatives, realizing that such efforts are something consumers recognize and appreciate. And conservationists are engaging creatively with government and business, blurring the line once drawn between traditional foes.

"I think it would be virtually impossible to solve the huge array of environmental problems we face if we don't get the business community involved," said Thomas Tietenberg, Mitchell Family Professor of Economics and director of Environmental Studies. "They are serious and important players."

At Colby, the list of alumni players is long and varied, including Kent Wommack '77, who orchestrated The Nature Conservancy's unprecedented paper-company land purchase along the St. John and Penobscot rivers (see Update, p.5); Eric Most '93, whose consulting firm, INFORM, tackles the thorniest global environmental problems; and Jill Stasz Harris '86, who steers communities to funding for environmental projects. In this issue of *Colby* we introduce two more of the many alumni riding the leading edge of this new environmental wave.

PHOTOS BY: PAUL SWEN, LEFT; BRIAN SPEER, RIGHT

The eastern white pine panels in Matt Hancock's office, straight from the Hancock Lumber sawmills down the road, smell like a fresh pine forest. A large, scenic photograph that Hancock '90 proudly displays above his desk boasts the focus of a recent land deal—the purchase of famed Tumbledown Mountain in western Maine.

More and more in the lumber business of the 21st century, the two—business and natural beauty—go hand in hand.

Hancock and his brother, Kevin, a Bowdoin graduate, run Hancock Land Company and Hancock Lumber Company, a family enterprise started in 1848. The brothers are the sixth generation. When their father passed away in 1997 and his sons inherited the business, Matt had been running the sawmills and Kevin was heading the retail stores.

The land company did a tiny bit of land business but bore no resemblance to the operation the Hancocks run today. "It was a completely decaffeinated company," Matt Hancock said. "We had to caffeinate it, add some sugar and bring it to life."

Since the reinvention of Hancock Land in 1997, the company has expanded its land base from 8,000 acres to almost 40,000 acres. The firm operates as two companies, Hancock Land and Hancock Lumber, managed by the same board of directors.

Matt Hancock '90 has moved his family's lumber and land companies into the forefront of conservation in Maine.

It's all part of an emerging trend in the timber industry, one that melds conservation and business in a relationship that benefits both interests. The Hancocks are leading the charge.

"There are a lot of overnight conservationists out there," Matt Hancock said. "The concept of being passionate about it is still relatively unique."

And passionate he is. In June 2001 Hancock Lumber was certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, one of the most rigorous certifying bodies in the world, and became one of only two FSC "green-certified" companies in Maine. Being green-certified means taking an approach to the land different from the approach more conventional, old-style timber companies take. Rather than harvesting all of the trees and then selling the land for development, he explains, the new thinking is long term. "We like to go in and, to the best of our ability, manage poor form and poor quality trees on that site," Hancock said. "Even though they are poor form or poor quality, we are still taking fiber to the market and maintaining a cash flow mechanism. In fifteen to seventeen years, we'll be able to go back in and do the same thing, instead of waiting more than 80 years for regrowth."

Tumbledown Mountain, just north of Mt. Blue State Park, is one of Maine's favorite day hikes, with three peaks and a "jewel-like alpine lake," according to the *Maine Atlas and Gazetteer*. To make the Tumbledown project work, Hancock Land put up the money to buy land that was for sale. The company then sold Tumbledown Pond and the well-known hiking trail as a conservation easement and sold another parcel to the state. As a private family enterprise, Hancock Land doesn't have the luxury of carrying long-term debt. The company worked with three state agencies and several conservation groups to ensure that conservation dollars would be available. "Tumbledown is a classic multi-party endeavor, one of the things that makes these deals so interesting," Hancock said. "I technically owned the land the trail is on for a few days, and I have to say it was pretty neat to go up there at that time."

Expanding the firm's land base will add to the vitality of the industry and reduce its reliance on other landowners. The Casco and Sebago region, where the Hancocks operate, has been affected by Portland's suburban sprawl, which has led to forest fragmentation and liquidation harvesting. "You've got a lot of second homes, and houses are getting bigger," Hancock said, "and that's fine and dandy for the retail business. But not managing that in a more appropriate way is leading to a shrinking [of the] land base that's needed to feed the forest products industry."

Hancock predicts that being green-certified will be a necessity to compete in the future. Buyers, such as Home Depot and conglomerate Time Warner, which relies on timber companies for pulp and paper, have been pressured by consumers to ensure that products are "green." More and more, those major players will want to buy from green-certified companies, Hancock believes.

He recognizes that the first priority is for the company to succeed over the long term. "I don't do this just because I feel a sense of responsibility that someone needs to be out in the marketplace doing this. I feel more passion and enthusiasm about being part of a six-generation legacy. When I look at the pictures of my dad and my grandfather and my great-grandfather and so on, I feel a sense of pride. I have three daughters and my brother has two, so it looks like it's going to be a seventh generation of women, which is awesome.

"It's fun stuff," he said. "My colleagues [including Peter McKinley '87] here are fantastic. When you have a culture that's permeated with doing great stuff, it's amazing the talent you can attract to carry this charge with you. We are growing as quickly as good deals present themselves. We're not going back to eight thousand acres." *—Abigail Wheeler '04*

Environmental conservation and sustainable development aren't just trendy catch phrases for Corbett Bishop '93; they're his *raison d'etre*.

A former Texan and self-taught Swahili speaker who has called Momella, Tanzania, home for nearly 10 years, Bishop has been at the forefront of the African conservation movement, working tirelessly to bring water to populations occupying areas in need. "Water is the penultimate issue in sub-Saharan Africa," Bishop said, "and the astronomical population growth is serving to further strain this precious resource."

At greatest risk, according to Bishop, are

Masai pastoralists who "live in perfect harmony with wildlife." The local populations have been forced to rely upon poorly constructed dams and pipelines built during the colonial era, and the maze of infrastructure has been in disarray since Tanzania's independence in 1963.

Until now. Bishop's current project, located in West Kilimanjaro Longido, a stretch of land near the Kenyan border, in the foothills between Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Meru, entails rehabilitating the network of pipelines in order to provide water for the Masai and their coexisting ecosystem. "They [the Masai] are so in tune with the environment and its conservation that their timeline is based on the environment. They essentially consider their family milestones in terms of birth and death and what's going on environmentally," Bishop said.

Another of his projects, located near the Manyara National Parks and the Terengeri region, involves similar water rehabilitation and restoration components but also includes a more commercial aspect. The plan involves setting aside land for wildlife, land that will simultaneously manage the ever-growing cattle population as well as provide habitat for the Masai and their wildlife. The area is fragile. Its sustainability has been compromised by population growth and the expansion of farming, which has depleted the water supply and stripped the land of grasses for cattle grazing.

As an American in East Africa, Bishop is still politically marginalized. As a non-citizen, he can't vote or run for office. And Tanzania's colonial past makes race an inescapable issue. For that reason, Bishop said, he is most effective advocating through the government or a large aid organization.

Despite the inefficiency of the middleman, Bishop considers himself lucky. "I get to work with a younger generation of Africans who are very forward-thinking. Conservation in East Africa is moving outside the national parks . . . and into the villages. We need a solution that's broad-based and includes both the lives of people and the wildlife. I'm very, very optimistic."

Although parliament-based assistance for his projects is rare since money is in short supply, Bishop does receive commitments that prevent legal issues from flaring.

The empowerment of local villagers is critical to the sustainability of their populations, he stressed. Tourism, bringing money to poor villages and provinces, provides a means of surviving financially. Inevitably, this places pastoralist villagers and their environment in a precarious position, where cultural preservation is threatened by exploitation. A delicate balance between the two extremes, however, is not far-fetched, Corbett said. It's a reality. "We're searching for some sort of compromise between conservation and survival," he said. "Good conservation ethics, and therefore cash influence from tourism, will provide a better lifeline to these people than chopping down trees or killing animals for their meat. This will benefit people in the long term."

Many of Bishop's own international clients help support these villagers. Besides attending to environmental consulting and conservation projects, Bishop, owner and founder of Corbett Bishop Safaris, serves as a mountain and safari guide in one of the most sought-after wildlife regions in the world. He employs local Masai as guides. All are quick to convey to clients the delicate issues surrounding water and wildlife competition. In this way the commercial world meets the complex and fragile sphere of conservation.

Bishop's trips aren't your average walk in the park. "Many people who come are interested in the *Out of Africa* experience," Bishop said. "There's wonderful wildlife but also wonderful comforts; they can get both." Some come to climb 19,335-foot Mt. Kilimanjaro, others for the traditional 4x4 safari experience in the bush. Still others prefer walking trips using camels as both mounts and pack animals. Save for the leave-no-trace environmental ethics exercised in the field to prevent further ecological damage, no two expeditions are alike.

Just after graduation from Colby in 1993, Bishop, born and raised in Houston, headed west—to the imposing Cascade Mountains of Washington state, where he served as a mountaineering guide for world-renowned guiding company Mountain Madness. It was there that he met the late Scott Fischer, who would eventually serve as Bishop's connection with famed Mt. Everest IMAX director David Breashears. Several years later, in 2000, Breashears called on Bishop and his Tanzanian colleague, Allan Mbaga, to organize logistical support for his next IMAX film, *Kilimanjaro: Mountain of Many Faces.* Bishop likened the experience to "moving a small village [of more than 200 people] up a huge mountain every day . . . but it was absolutely incredible," he said.

Corbett Bishop '93, right, with Masai guide Mr. Pello in Tanzania, where Bishop is working in the increasingly diversified conservation movement.

Bishop first traveled to Africa in 1988 with his family, and in 1994 he was offered a two-year contract with Mountain Travel Sobek to guide climbs up Kilimanjaro, one of the world's Seven Summits and the largest free-standing mountain in the world. Bishop was guiding within two days of his arrival. He lost track after 50 summits.

Conservationist, expert climber and safari guide credentials aside, Bishop is also a master of all things family and children. His wife, Camilla, a painter, and their two children, Luca, almost 3, and Ella, 1, make frequent sojourns to the bush, where they revel in the magnificent wildlife. "Africa is the best place to raise children. My children have seen giraffes, buffaloes and lions, and all they do is ask to go to the bush. It's not 'I want to watch Barney,' it's, 'Let's go the bush!'" he said.

There isn't a doubt in his mind that he and his family will be in East Africa for the long haul. "This is my adopted home," Bishop said. "Africa is coming into a dawn, things are changing here, and I've got a lot invested in the future of this country. This place is inspiring." —*Sara Blask '03*

PHOTOS BY: FRED FIELD, LEFT; JON SALTON, RIGHT