

Gathering the CT community around our common environment

By Judy Benson



Wanjiku Gatheru, center, keynote speaker at the conference, was introduced by Connecticut Land Conservation Council Executive Director Amy Blaymore Patterson and interviewed by David Sutherland after her talk. Photo: Judy Benson

People brought together by love for their local environment aren't just protecting land and wildlife.

They "...are shaping people's relationships to it. This work is not just about the land, it's about belonging to its care."

So said Wanjiku Gatheru, or "Wawa," as she prefers, during her keynote address at the [Connecticut Land Conservation Council's](#) annual conference on March 21. Raised in the "Quiet Corner" of Northeast Connecticut, founder of the national non-profit Black Girl Environmentalist (<https://blackgirlenvironmentalist.org/>) and author of the forthcoming book *The Soul of Our Planet*, she spoke at Wesleyan University to an audience of 660 people, many of them members of local land trusts and other conservation and environmental organizations.

"What your groups do are not just acts of conservation, they are acts of world-building," she said. "Our relationship to the land is something we practice together."

Her inspirational message was well appreciated by three young women in the audience, Zion Jones of New Haven, Sara Trueax of Wethersfield and Addie Mehl of Winchester. Jones is on the staff of [Gather New Haven](#), which promotes "neighbors and nature thriving together," while Trueax and Mehl are part of more traditional land trusts in their communities. The three met during a group exercise at one of the more than 50 conference workshops that day and shared some of their takeaways.

"There are a lot of people in Connecticut doing great work," said Mehl, who is relatively new to the state. "Building relationships with diverse groups is the way forward."

Trueax said she's been coming to the annual conference for several years to get re-energized by learning about projects going on around the state. She also appreciated being reminded to always consider the bigger context of history and socio-economic factors before embarking on a new initiative.

"We need to make sure we're looking at things holistically," she said.

For Zion, the conference brought out the need for

environmental groups to expand their reach into communities being disproportionately impacted by pollution and other environmental harms.

"A major thing I've been hearing," she said, "is uplifting the marginalized and under-resourced communities who we need to be the new leaders of conservation in Connecticut."

That was one of the main themes of the workshop where she met Trueax and Mehl. Titled "Youth and Community Science," it was led by UConn Associate Extension Professor Laura Cisneros and four UConn students who served as mentors to high school youth from urban communities in the Conservation Ambassador Program. It seeks to "provide a pathway into environmental careers" and "elevate youth leadership," Cisneros said.

After a summer field experience, the high school students return home to lead their own community-based environmental projects. These have included improving access to parks and other green spaces and helping create a community garden in a Hispanic neighborhood.

"The goal of the projects was to prioritize equity and justice-oriented work, and for the students to understand the origin of the problem," said Shanelle Therarajah, one of the mentors, all of whom wore T-shirts with "Environmental Changemaker" written on the back.

Between workshops, participants had a chance to visit the information tables of dozens of organizations with diverse environmental missions pertaining to topics such as farmland, tree diseases, green energy, soil health and financial support for land conservation. The workshops offered a similar variety of themes, from building a firefly sanctuary to dog policies, crafting effective messages for signs to the role of land trusts in meeting the need for affordable housing.

The need to bridge the divide between land conservation and improving communities for the people who live there was addressed at a morning workshop titled, "What is a Community Land Trust?"

"We're all being asked to do more," said Clayton Potter, vice president of the New London-based [Southeastern Connecticut Community Land Trust](#). "We're being called to look at the larger ecosystem, to think about the people beyond the preserves, beyond your property boundaries."

Myrna Martinez, executive director of the community land trust, said her group has helped create pocket parks and community gardens in New London, helped make home ownership possible for people who could not otherwise afford it, and worked with another land trust on a project that preserved a working farm while also conserving open space.

"The human part—peoples' needs—overlay the land for us," she said.

