

**Americans for the Arts Conference  
Arts & Environmental Sustainability in Practice Plenary Session  
Saturday, June 20, 2009  
10:30am-12:00pm**

**Kermit was Wrong**

Tell me there's not a little voice running through your head right now. It's asking "Do I really have time to think about the environment? What about my bottom line? We're retrenching - cutting back staff and program. We have to focus on our core mission." The voice sounds a little like Kermit the Frog in his famous lament... "It's not easy being green."

I suggest a reply to that small voice: As President Obama said this Earth Day, "The choice we face is not between saving our environment and saving our economy – it's a choice between prosperity and decline." In other words, you can hunker down to survive the downturn, or you can actively participate in the recovery.

Environmental leadership is an opportunity to be seized – now, not when times get better. It's one of the levers we can pull to make better times for ourselves and for our organizations.

Two years ago, Wolf Trap began to work toward carbon neutrality by making small, affordable changes – like adjusting the thermostat, recycling more, composting, and using bio degradable concession products among other things. The results have been astonishing. Over the past two years, Wolf Trap has decreased our carbon footprint by 19%. We're proud to say that the decrease in our electricity use alone has been the carbon equivalent of planting 18,000 trees or NOT driving 225,000 miles.

But let's talk dollars. During this same time period, while the electrical rates in our area went up 18%, we still realized a savings of thousands of dollars on our electric bill. And because we recycled more and hauled less to the dump, our waste removal costs went down by 13%. So when you talk about "bottom line" – that's real money.

And on top of that, environmental action presents opportunities for fundraising, community engagement, and audience development. As one example, we recently partnered with the Boy Scouts, a professional electronic equipment recycler, and our area technology council to host an e-cycling event where people donated a small amount to have their old computers, tv's, and appliances safely recycled.

Our work was easy: we provided our parking lot and some messaging. The results: 3.5 tons of electronic equipment was safely and responsibly recycled, new audiences made their way to our space and were directed to the box office, and ultimately our education department will receive a portion of the fee from each recycled item.

And what about mission? Like you, we're committed to providing excellent arts opportunities for a diverse audience. Some of the most meaningful work we have commissioned in recent years has been done in celebration of the Earth's most magnificent places – our national parks. This work, Wolf Trap's *Face of America* series, has given us the chance to reach out to those diverse groups that we talk about in our mission statement. Imagine an audience of outdoor adventurers, country music fans, dance fanatics, and nostalgic vacationers – nearly 6,000 strong – standing, cheering, and stomping for a modern dance performance. It happened! (By the way, we also strengthened our brand with a national PBS television special based on this work.)

Given these examples, and the many others that exist, the question is this: Financially and artistically, how can we afford -- NOT to protect this planet?

So the fact is, we have both a responsibility and an opportunity. First, look at the responsibility: Reversing global climate change depends on empowering each human to make changes in behavior. Who better to influence individuals, in a deep and meaningful way, than the arts?

Doing this good work for the planet presents us with an enormous opportunity. Honoring the earth can save money for our own organizations, help us to increase brand recognition and build community, and it allows us to create spectacular art.

To succeed, we must do 3 things. I'll describe each of them to you briefly, and then we will look at them in greater depth:

Step 1: First and foremost, engage our senses in all that surrounds us – in the reality of our environment, be it beautiful or challenging. We, who are in the business of sharing vivid experiences and images with others, must allow ourselves to drink in the world around us – in other words, to be inspired.

Step 2: Conduct the business of the arts in a way that honors the earth. Let's face it: No earth, no stages, no audiences...so it is best that we take care of "Mother" - now. Or as the age old Kenyan proverb says: "Treat the earth well; it was not given to you by your parents, but loaned to you by your children."

Step 3: Tell the Story. The arts are society's storytellers, so we have the double opportunity of leading by example and using our art to encourage others to follow their own paths to environmental sustainability.

Let's take a closer look at these three steps:

First, we begin this journey by stopping. I know this sounds counter-intuitive, but here is my thinking: In its zeal to change individual behavior, the environmental movement has created a new Calvinism. Take plenty of guilt, throw in a confusing, ever-increasing list of don'ts, add a healthy dose of fear, and you have either Ibsen, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, or the extremes of the environmental movement as we know it.

Green Puritanism doesn't – and shouldn't - work for us! If we want to change individual behavior, we must be true to ourselves as artists, as people who embrace the whole of the human experience. So we have to allow ourselves to be inspired.

In my case, inspiration comes every night under the stars at Wolf Trap, America's only National Park for the Performing Arts. I'm also awed by other National Parks throughout our country – from the beauty of Acadia National Park in Maine to the stark realization that within a few short years, the glaciers will disappear entirely from Glacier National Park in Montana. For me, a lifetime of travel through our National Parks culminated in my recent research sabbatical where I visited and photographed 87 of our nation's 391 national parks.

Today we are sharing a few sabbatical photographs with you as I speak. Feel free to daydream. Perhaps you will be reminded of your own connection to the earth. Maybe you will reflect with pride on the steps you and your organization have already taken. By taking this first step, perhaps you will be inspired - and in the near future you will create or facilitate great art in celebration of Earth.

The second step is your credibility test: Conduct the business of the arts in a way that honors the earth.

In 2008, Americans for the Arts, Wolf Trap, and The Aspen Institute presented a National Summit on the Arts and Environment, with support from national consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton. Thirty leaders in the arts, environment, civic life, education, and business gathered to consider the role of the arts in environmental sustainability.

On Wolf Trap's web site, you can read their findings in three areas - 1. engaging the arts 2. going green within our own organizations 3. greening the community

Among their recommendations for engaging the arts included establishing a green award for artists and arts organizations and establishing a national leadership council on greening the arts. You can respond to Summit recommendations by contacting Americans for the Arts. We will provide you with an email address at the end of this presentation. ([leadership@artsusa.org](mailto:leadership@artsusa.org))

To go green within our own organizations, Summit participants provided broad recommendations. Two important examples:

- Establish a base line measure of the organization's use of resources: water, waste, and energy. Look at your impact on the community as well.
- Identify and develop a prioritized strategy for improvement

For practical advice, I recommend the green resources section on the Americans for the Arts convention website. The site has suggestions on your green audit, the essential first step for change. The site also includes many tips and resources, from carpooling to conference calls, energy reduction to eco-design.

But beware! When you see the wonderful ideas on this website, you will be tempted to respond in one of two ways, both time-honored throughout the arts world: Either you may say "it's too much" and run screaming from the whole idea or you may dive in and try to do everything at

once and thus become overwhelmed. And then you'll run screaming from the whole idea! So, before taking any action, remember item 1 on both the Americans for the Arts website and in the Summit report: Establish your base line, choose your targets, and make a plan. Then, as closely as reality will allow, follow your plan, always keeping your focus on the smartest, most cost effective ways to reduce, reuse and recycle energy, water, and waste.

So, we've been inspired and we've begun to act as examples to others. Now, it's time to tell the story. First, as an industry we must share among ourselves. Many of you have already taken important steps to green your organizations or to go green as artists and as individuals. We hope that you will send your experiences and recommendations to the leadership site I mentioned earlier ([leadership@artsusa.org](mailto:leadership@artsusa.org).)

Then we must share our story with our community. I'm a theatre person, so I am definitely not recommending that we preach. Again, I refer you to findings from the 2008 Environmental Summit, which recommended these actions: Expand beyond our own sector: Engage with the business community, the environmental community, and educators by bringing content to their conferences and local meetings and by participating with them in joint messaging.

Finally, and most importantly, we must do what we do best: we must create art that moves our audiences.

It can be art with a specific environmental message, like Wolf Trap's *Junkyard Pirates*, a children's theatre production which uses giant puppets made entirely of recycled materials that literally hammers home the message of reduce, reuse, recycle. Or maybe it's art that crosses the boundaries of visual and experiential, like the *Shared Propulsion Car*, a pedal powered Buick Regal designed by artist Michel de Broin. There's a very funny video of its maiden tour and subsequent "arrest" by the Toronto police on You Tube.

Or art can have a direct benefit for the environment, like Xavier Cortada's *Reclamation Project*, completed in cooperation with the Miami Science Museum. It's an installation of mangrove seedlings that can be adopted and planted into areas where they will thrive. As described on the wonderful web site [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org), "Each plant begins its life as an art piece and matures as an act of restoration."

And if you are a mainstream artist or organization, and you're thinking that this is work best left to the eco-artist, remember that all art is a response to the world around us. Renowned choreographer Trey McIntyre never thought of himself as an environmentalist, but when we presented him with the possibility of creating a dance around the future of Glacier National Park and its melting glaciers, he was inspired to think about loss and how we as humans react to that loss. The resulting commission to be presented at Wolf Trap in August and on tour nationwide next season will give all of us a chance to react to a work of art that explores a profound human emotion, and gently reminds us of what is at stake in our battle to reverse climate change. As you head home from this beautiful "Green" City, I hope that you remember that you have the power to make incredible changes in the way we treat the Earth – I call it The Power of One – each individual can make a difference -- one act at a time.

And as artist Alan Sonfist says, *“Within the 21st century we have to redefine the role of the artist as an individual who is actively seeking solutions to improve our world.”*

In closing, I ask you to carry with you these three steps to using your art to save our planet:

First, allow yourself be inspired. Read some Whitman or Thoreau. Listen to Beethoven’s 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Visit a local museum. Come see Trey McIntyre’s dance at Wolf Trap. ... Or just go outdoors this afternoon, take a look around, and breathe a little.

Then, from a position of joy and wonder, plan the changes you can make to honor the earth - from the big impact items to practical, every day actions - in your own life and in the life of your organization. Finally, complete the circle by using your art to inspire others. I look forward to being inspired by you – and remember: Kermit was wrong; it’s not that hard being green.

Thank you.

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