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## Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Program

### Report on the First Workshop • June 23-26, 2003 • Hartland, VT

The first of four workshops convened the sixteen Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows at the Sustainability Institute (SI) and affiliated Cobb Hill CoHousing.



*“What a great, diverse, articulate bunch of folks! I came away feeling excited and rejuvenated, with greater clarity and energy for my work and a sense of greater connection to others’ work.”*

*- Christina Page, Rocky Mountain Institute*

(Picture: Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows & Sustainability Institute staff)

SI's goals for the Fellows Program are to learn from Donella Meadows' life example to increase the effectiveness of environmental leaders whose approach to sustainability displays analytic clarity and systemic change informed by spirit, values, and meaning.

Donella researched, taught, and acted on a set of analytic, communication, and visioning skills centered on a systems approach that addressed challenges in leadership towards sustainability. A primary focus of the Fellowship is two challenges Donella addressed in her work and life: learning within complex economic, social, and environmental systems; and action in multi-stakeholder arenas. Objectives for this first workshop were:

- (1) Build Fellows' skills in systems thinking, mental models, and visioning
- (2) Build Fellows' understanding of systems principles
- (3) Prepare for applied projects within Fellows' work environment
- (4) Build a Fellows' community

SI staff used presentations, systems games, and exercises to introduce systems thinking perspective and specific modeling skills. Fellows learned and practiced causal loop diagrams, mental models, and visioning. One Fellow called the workshop, *“a phenomenal learning experience. Systems thinking will be an extraordinary tool for me to apply in my day-to-day work and as a way to analyze the issues and projects on which I work.”*



Long-time SI colleague Peter Senge, whose book *The Fifth Discipline* was assigned as advance reading, joined the Fellows for an afternoon of dialogue. Particularly inspiring

were Senge's remarks about the power of commitment, networks, and relationships, all of which he views as more important than money when it comes to accomplishing plans. Peter gave the Fellows a difficult challenge concerning the hot-button word, "Growth." To help us think about a more compelling vision than "sustainable", he pushed the group to envision a possible future where the vital energy and creativity of growth in businesses would be also consistent with the fundamental laws of natural systems.

The 2003-2004 Fellows ([www.sustainer.org/fellows/2003Fellows.html](http://www.sustainer.org/fellows/2003Fellows.html)) are seasoned environmental professionals working on sustainability issues in diverse sectors and bioregions. The Fellows Program weaves together personal growth, effective teams, and strategic action based on systems analysis. Through creating this learning community, SI is developing in Fellows the capacity to lead a shared understanding of current reality, a vision for a desired future, and a strategy for getting there.

For many Fellows, the creation of a new learning network to apply systems thinking offers a much-needed forum to share experiences and trade ideas with like-minded colleagues. As John Fisk, food systems consultant reported, *"the group dynamic had an expansive effect on my thinking and sense that we can be successful."* Professional exchange and networking was grounded in new friendships that will deepen over the course of the remaining three workshops. As hoped, already we can see collaboration among Fellows amplifying the energy, imagination, and depth of perspective of the participants.

Bi-weekly homework assignments and coaching from the SI staff between workshops will ensure that Fellows apply what they learn to their home organizations. Among the new analytical and visioning tools are the abilities to draw causal diagrams, identify system drivers, and facilitate reflective inquiry.

Fellows were hosted by Cobb Hill CoHousing ([www.cobhill.org](http://www.cobhill.org)). While sharing homes, meals and work chores with Cobb Hill residents, Fellows became better acquainted with the community that Donella co-founded and which formed an important part of her life's work. Angela Park of the Environmental Leadership Program remarked, *"Seeing Cobb Hill, in all its vision, and connecting to the land and chores as a balance to the mental thinking and intellectual learning of the formal workshop, was extraordinary. I have never been to a retreat like this that had such great balance with the 'real world' and connection to place."*



For Fellows current work, see [www.sustainer.org/fellows/CurrentWork2003.html](http://www.sustainer.org/fellows/CurrentWork2003.html)