

# Beam Us Up, Kenny!

## CATCH THE BIONEERS CONFERENCE HERE IN NEW MEXICO

by Nate Downey



Bioneers at the Telluride satellite conference in 2004.

Photo courtesy of Bioneers © 2004

When Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simons organized the first Bioneers conference at La Fonda Hotel in 1990, about 250 people showed up for each of the three days. This year, from Friday, October 14, through Sunday, October 16, in San Rafael, California, 3,500 "biological pioneers" will pack the 16th Annual Bioneers Conference, "Bioneers 2005."

But that's not all. In 18 diverse communities across North America, including the high, dry country of northern New Mexico, about 4,000 bioneers will gather for the conference's morning plenary sessions beamed onto theater-size screens via satellite. And more importantly, before and after the plenaries these "Beaming Bioneers" will meet for lectures, workshops, seminars, information booths, fun events and local networking.

Unlike some environmental and social-change organizations that just bitch at the powers that be, the Bioneers promote replicable solutions for the most destabilizing problems of our time. Their goal, sustainability, is clear. Their methods, although ambitious, are unambiguous. By harvesting and recycling precipitation, by growing food locally, by using alternative fuels and on-site power generation, by applying natural principles to the built environment, by supporting small businesses, and by empowering people politically, the human family might one day just save itself from itself.

Perspectives at this year's conference will range from the hard but accessible science of Fritjof Capra, Janine Benyus and Carolyn Raffensperger to the practical but revolutionary politics of Thom Hartmann, David Cobb and Bill McKibben. Meanwhile, the seminal philosophy of Frances Moore Lappé (*Diet for a New America*) and the legendary activism of Bernice Johnson Reagon (*Sweet Honey in the Rock*) will, no doubt, motivate the crowd to take some serious action. Of course, a crew of radical traditionalist farmers like Michael Ableman (*On Good Land*) and a slew of visionary community planners like Sim Van der Ryn (*Sustainable Communities*) will present the kind of essential, down-to-earth examples that make the Bioneers so significant.

Perennially, the conference also calls attention to lesser-known stories of courage and success. In 2005, this type of fresh, zesty inspiration will come from

speakers like Diane Wilson, a mother of five and a fourth-generation shrimper turned community activist, and Wil Bullock, a 24-year-old musician turned mega-hip nutritionist. Omar Freilla, a founding board member of Sustainable South Bronx, will explain how environmental restoration and socioeconomic justice are inextricably linked aspects of the same basic issue. Gloria Flora, a whistleblower at the U.S. Forest Service, will describe her efforts, in the face of death threats, to make our tax dollars work to create a more sustainable park system.

"No conference on Earth," says author/entrepreneur Paul Hawken, "celebrates more fully the possibilities of creating a world that is conducive to life. Bioneers is central to the reimagining of what it means to be human." For the last three years the conference has sold out three weeks in advance, and conference organizers say that 2005 will likely break previous records. A full three-day conference pass costs \$405. For a detailed and comprehensive schedule of events, to register for the conference, or to learn more about the Bioneers, visit [www.bioneers.org](http://www.bioneers.org).

### BACK IN NEW MEXICO

Before clicking over to [priceline.com](http://priceline.com) for airline tickets, rental cars and hotel rooms, before asking your boss for extra time off work, and before starting to save all the money you'll need for a long weekend of eating out



at pricey Marin County restaurants, remember: At a fraction of the cost of a trip to the coast, you can enjoy much of the conference from the comfort and convenience of your own bioregion, while focusing your efforts where they can be most effective — locally.

With broad support from a number of non-profit organizations, SUSTAIN TAOS and the University of New Mexico, Taos will host the New Mexico Bioneers Conference this year. On Friday, October 14, events will take place at the Taos Convention Center. Over the weekend, proceedings will be held at the Student Union building on the Albuquerque campus of the University of New Mexico. Potential sponsors, supporters, exhibitors, volunteers, presenters and attendees should visit [www.sustaintaos.org](http://www.sustaintaos.org) or call 505-758-2103 for more information.

"Ticket prices are a little bit of a moving target at the moment," admits SUSTAIN TAOS president Bill Dedmon. "We'll have discounts for students, discounts for multiple-day passes, and discounts for reserving your space in advance."

Although it's an excellent bonus, the best thing about Beaming Bioneers isn't that Bioneers conferences are now more affordable. The greatest benefit to the world is not that thousands more people will be inspired by watching a big screen. The genius of the satellites is that they will bring local people together who really want to save the planet by saving their own little corner of it.

Leaving out the fact that the City Different has been leapfrogged by event organizers,

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topics covered in our bioregion's version will surely resemble those of the original conference held just off the southwest corner of the Plaza (as well as the Second Annual Bioneers Conference, in 1991, held at St. John's College in Santa Fe). Water supplies, or what to do about our lack thereof, will certainly flood the schedule. Sunlight, or what to do with our abundance of it, will be a hot topic. But Dedmon is quick to flaunt an explicitly inclusive approach that his group brings to the organizing of the New Mexico conference. He also emphasizes the effectiveness of a multicultural, apolitical perspective to the kind of coalition building needed at this historical moment. "We want to make Taos the capital of the universe as far as sustainability goes," he beams.

A small-diameter-tree-harvesting program at Picuris Pueblo will be one of the featured events on Friday. With support from Günter Pauli's international environmental group, Zeri Foundation, Picuris recently started a sustainable forestry project that shows how various products and benefits (including charcoal production, timber curing, mushroom farming and mulch making) can help make rural communities in northern New Mexico generate income from within while protecting the remaining old-growth forests of our ancestors.

A Bioneers conference wouldn't be a conference of bioneers without a serious look at



## BEAM US UP . . .

food issues. On the agenda, participants should find "local food production, food security and the junk they're feeding our kids in the schools," Dedmon explains. Biodiesel and other alternative energy sources are sure to play a role during numerous concurrent sessions, he adds.

The weekend's events, in Albuquerque, will likely reflect a "younger crowd due to the proximity of the university," predicts Dedmon. SUSTAIN TAOS, which he says his group "prefers" to see capitalized in print, hopes to directly address important connections between New Mexico's diverse urban and rural communities. "We feel the environment is too important to be the domain of any one part of the political spectrum," he maintains.

New Mexico is the only bioregion that will be beaming at two different locations. For Friday's events in Taos, state-of-the-art beaming equipment will be trucked down by a Denver company. In Albuquerque, the University of New Mexico owns the necessary technology to receive the instant feed from space over the weekend. Dedmon thinks the Taos Conference Center has room for about 400 people and the Student Union has a capacity of 500. As a first-ever effort, it's anybody's guess as to when or if the conference will sell out. At press time SUSTAIN TAOS was still taking applications from potential speakers.

One local bioneer, who will not be speaking in Taos or Albuquerque, is Jeffrey Bronfman.

At the main conference in California on Sunday afternoon, Bronfman will be part of a panel discussion called "The Politics of Psychoactive Plants: Religious Freedom, Shamanism and Sacred Plants." As the spiritual representative of Brazil's Uniado Vegetal church, Bronfman is testing the boundaries of religious liberty under the U.S. Constitution. At issue is whether or not the ceremonial use of a plant, ayahuasca, is protected by the First Amendment. According to the California conference's schedule, the connection to the Bioneers' theme is that "psychoactive plants are at the heart of many traditional and indigenous spiritual and religious traditions, yet many have been outlawed or severely restricted." By implication, preventing the human heart from practicing a particular peaceful belief system is not only unconstitutional, but it is also a direct, aggressive assault at some of the people who best practice local self-reliance.

No one is quite sure why Beaming Bioneers, now in its fourth year, has taken so long to get back to its Santa Fe birthplace, but it probably has plenty to do with the fact that pulling off such a weekend is a logistical feat. Kristin Rothballer, satellite program manager, says dozens of communities annually express interest in setting up Bioneers satellite conferences in their bioregions. Despite the interest, "Bioneers has elected to grow the program slowly and strategically, and is very excited to add New Mexico to the roster of sites this year," she stresses enthusiastically.

Hailing from nine red states, five blue states, Washington, D.C., and British Columbia, 18 communities in 2005 will be beaming from as far northwest as Anchorage, as far south as Houston, as far southeast as Atlanta, and as far east as Marion, Massachusetts. The Mid-west contingent is certainly substantial, including two cities in Michigan and one each in Illinois and Indiana. A complete list can be found at [www.bioneers.org](http://www.bioneers.org).

The Rocky Mountains region is the most well-represented geographical area of the continent in terms of beamees per capita. From Bozeman, Montana, to Boulder and Telluride in Colorado, from Logan, Utah, and Prescott, Arizona, to Taos and Albuquerque, it is not surprising that those who settled "pioneer" country seem most interested in the bioneer concept.

Maybe the notion of "survival via innovation" courses through one's veins faster as a function of altitude. Maybe it's the almost unmitigated space we face everyday. Perhaps it's the individualistic mountain culture that provides greater personal space out of which the human spirit is slightly more likely to thrive. Whatever the cause of our enthusiasm, it seems clear that here, and now, we must, out of some very real moral obligation and for the sake of the human family, slap on our modern-day coonskin caps, grab the reins at the head of the next wagon train, and blaze a trail through this treacherous, but inevitable, transition toward sustainable societies. ○