

Preserving Vermont's Working Landscape

One hundred years ago, three quarters of Vermont was cleared of forest and was primarily active farmland. With the decline of hill farming, Vermont is currently about 78 percent forested. The rocky land once used for grazing sheep and cattle is now thriving second growth woodland. This forest land with its thin, glacial till soil is a far more valuable resource than the agricultural land it once was. By conserving Vermont's woods, we can utilize the available timber while promoting healthy ecosystems and ultimately preserving a way of life.

Working forests have been a crucial part of Vermont since humans first came to the state about 12,000 years ago. Native Americans, and later colonists, relied on the woodlands to provide them with food and shelter. Today, countless Vermonters still rely on the forest for a livelihood. Many are in the logging industry, operating chainsaws, skidders and log trucks to harvest both softwood and hardwood timber. Others process the raw logs into more usable forms such as lumber, firewood or pulpwood. Still others turn potentially waste wood into fuel for power plants or pellet stoves. Some Vermonters do not count on forest products for a living, but instead depend on the serene natural beauty of the state. Tourism is a widely growing industry in Vermont as many visitors travel from out of state to enjoy a range of outdoor activities in the Green Mountains. Vermonters themselves are lucky to have prime access to 52 state parks, 272 miles of the Long Trail and thousands of acres of public forestland.

The economic value of our woodlands is only one part of the picture. Vermont's forests are diverse ecosystems with over 50 tree species and natural communities ranging from sub-alpine krummholz to hemlock-northern hardwoods. It is important to look at the well-being of our forests from an environmental perspective when managing them for human use. This holistic management approach is relatively simple, although it is not practiced as widely as it should be. Landowners or foresters need to consider both the ecology of the land and its potential revenue. The goal of some managers may be to create a preserve for a rare plant community, while others might want to create ideal deer habitat. Many are interested in harvesting firewood and timber off the land to make a profit or to pay for taxes. Unfortunately, traditional forest use in Vermont is declining and commercial development threatens to destroy the rural nature of the state people take for granted.

It is possible, however, for Vermont to be an example for the nation of how a partnership with the land is beneficial. With enough community interest, the destruction of natural areas can be curbed. Just as Vermont is leading the local and organic foods movement, we can have a local wood movement. Forest products can be made to meet Vermont's modern needs for fuel and power generation. Biomass (often waste wood and bark) has great potential for renewable electricity production. Forest industries can power the state's economy and allow Vermonters to maintain a degree of self-sustainability as they always have. For generations, Vermont's residents have been fiercely independent, relying on agriculture, forestry and any other means to survive. Today diversity is also key. From sugaring to hunting big game, all aspects of wooded areas can be used sustainably. A diverse forest is ecologically stable with proportionate numbers of producer and consumer species. Humans can fit into the natural order of our surroundings and must, if we want to preserve Vermont's distinctive landscape.