

Vermonters and Forests: A Symbiotic Relationship

Story has it that in 1773 explorers stood on top of Killington Mountain and bestowed the name Verd-Mont – or Green Mountains – to the territory. While this story may be apocryphal, the beauty of the state is not, and over 200 years later, its verdant, forested landscape is still mesmerizing. While the splendor of the trees, particularly in autumn, attracts thousands to our state, these forests also provide wood for building, fuel to heat homes, and habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna. Such a valuable resource warrants our stewardship in order to maximize its potential and ensure that it is maintained for posterity.

Looking back in our short history to the early nineteenth century, it is easy to see the results of not safeguarding this resource. In the early 1800s, Vermont was a fledgling state, largely populated with small subsistence farms. Thousands of wooden homes and outbuildings were being constructed, and wood was the most common type of fuel used for both heat and cooking. In the 1830s, there were over a million sheep in Vermont, which led to a great transformation in Vermont's landscape. It was estimated that around 70% of the forests were cleared for grazing sheep, which led to a number of negative consequences, including erosion. Although it has taken nearly two hundred years to recoup from this time of deforestation, Vermont has recovered and is now approximately 78% forests, earning it the title of the fourth most forested state in America.

Looking at our past underscores the importance of sustainable stewardship and what we need to do to insure Vermont will stay the same for future generations. These efforts include selective cutting to maintain the health of the forest. Since there is a great deal of competition for resources within the forest, selective cutting weeds out the old and defective trees, which can then be used for other purposes such as firewood. With these trees gone, there is more space and nutrients for the younger and healthier trees to grow.

Having lived for six years on my grandparents' dairy farm, I've seen firsthand the importance of stewardship and how crucial trees are to Vermont and its citizens. During the coldest days of winter, like many other Vermonters, we throw an extra log on the fire instead of cranking up the thermostat. By using wood, which is a renewable resource, we

are helping to promote a greener, more ecological state. Moreover, since my family sells maple syrup, we rely on the maple trees in our sugar bush to provide sap that can be processed into syrup. My family is not alone in our reliance on forests. Like many towns in Vermont, my hometown has a tourist-based economy, which is contingent upon the beauty of our forests and landscape.

One of the reasons people are drawn to Vermont is because of its connection to nature; when one drives to school, one can see a flock of turkeys cross the road, or a gangly fawn walking for the first time. It's a special aspect of Vermont that very few other places have.

Vermonters and forests have always had a symbiotic relationship. The forests provide us with many resources including firewood to heat and build our homes, and in return it is our duty to keep the forests healthy and manageable. Written in our state song is the phrase, "Let us live to protect her beauty"; I think that we owe it to Vermont to keep working forests, and hopefully as the next generation of forests stewards, we can do just that!