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Working Together in New England

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Abstract

Much can be learned from community-based environmental protection efforts in New England. The region's rural character, mixed ownerships, and resource-dependent communities provide a wealth of innovative examples of merging diverse interests toward a common goal. In many cases, the key to success is listening to local constituents and interests and fostering local trust and mutual respect. In Vermont, this has most often been realized through public/private partnerships on the local level.

INTRODUCTION

The town meeting in New England is alive and well. But the town meeting as a form of government is really quite different from what some of our national politicians, like President Bill Clinton and others, have recently used. In New England, town meetings are gatherings where the town folks get together annually and elect city officials, develop the new year's budget, deal with ordinances, and address the myriad issues of local self-governance. In short, town meetings represent how small communities are run.

Every community in Vermont has its town meeting on the same day each year. In Bristol, Vermont, the town meeting held last March was relatively uneventful.¹ To the north, the town of Woodbury passed its town budget of about \$250,000 after debating many issues and finally rejecting a \$2,500 proposal for road signs. Apparently the locals already knew where everything was.

South Royalton spent considerable time debating a ban on nude dancing. South Royalton is the home of Vermont Law School, and someone pointed out that a constitutional challenge to the ban might turn out to be quite expensive for the town. Finally, the bar owner whose proposal had sparked the ban withdrew his plan. The town rejected the ban rather than risk a lawsuit.

Jerry Greenfield lost the selectmen's race in

Williston. Jerry and his business partner, Ben Cowen, have done very well in the ice-cream business. But it seems that Jerry's skills were not good enough for the people of Williston.

Town meetings are an old tradition in New England, and they really work. One reason they work is that people are free to argue about issues—sometimes really having it out—but they respect each other in the process because tomorrow they will again meet their friends and various townspeople on the street, at the general store, and at the local gas station. Civility exists because they all must continue to live together.

Ed Marston's romantic description of the unspoiled and wide-open West was really about the rural West—not about Salt Lake City or Phoenix or Denver or Las Vegas²—and rural is how one might describe Vermont as well. Vermont is small: its six million acres are home to only a half million people, most of whom live in small towns. The state has a diversified economy, yet there are not many jobs to go around. While Vermont has missed the economic booms of the past, it also seems to miss the busts that inevitably follow.

Vermont is a state where things are quite personal. Frank Sesno, the TV commentator, is a graduate of Middlebury College. He was at Middlebury in early 1993 as an expert alumnus returning to counsel

This paper was transcribed from an audiotape of the presentation given during the symposium. *Ed.*

¹The author's references are to meetings held in 1993. *Ed.*

²See Marston, this volume, page 1

students and to present seminars. One interesting comment he made about the media was that if media professionals do not relate to people they are out of business. His contention that relating to people is important applies not only to the media but to land and resource issues as well.

Moving beyond conflict to resolve resource issues requires working together. As obvious as that sounds, it often does not seem to work that way. Natural resource managers have not been doing a very good job of bringing people together. Local action, wherever possible, is the key to success.

COOPERATIVE MANAGEMENT IN THE EASTERN NATIONAL FORESTS

Many Eastern national forests provide a good example of community-based decision-making. Some eighty years ago, land and resource problems in the Eastern United States led to the passage of the Weeks Act and, subsequently, to the creation of many of our Eastern national forests. The White Mountain National Forest was one of the very first national forests established and, quite expectedly, the locals had a very paternalistic view of the forest right from the beginning. Ever since, forest managers have had to figure out how to get along with local interests to survive.

This paternalistic view is widespread in the East. For example, the Finger Lakes National Forest, covering just 13,000 acres, was established in 1983. Before that, it was a land-use area—a result of the Bankhead-Jones Act of the dust-bowl days when the federal government acquired and managed bankrupt farms. Early in the Reagan administration, some of these areas were declared surplus. But local people near the Finger Lakes valued this public resource, which had been managed as national forest for twenty years, and fought to keep it that way. Trying to preserve the area, they contacted Frank Horton, their local representative and the ranking member of the New York congressional delegation. Within a few weeks Congress passed an act that created the Finger Lakes National Forest.

CASE STUDIES IN NEW ENGLAND RESOURCE PROTECTION

The following case studies present some interesting, relevant factors, illuminating the importance of relating to people and achieving goals at the local level through community action.

GREEN MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST

Green Mountain National Forest is about one-third of a million acres and growing. Approximately 50,000 acres have been acquired over the last decade. The forest has a good multiple-use program, including an active timber program featuring high-quality hardwood species. But the focus of the forest, and the main reason people want it there, is to protect the Green Mountain Range as a visual backdrop and area for dispersed recreation. The timber program serves only as a framework for the more important issues of recreation, fishing, watershed protection, and wildlife.

The mid 1980s were a contentious time for many national forests, and during this time the land management plan for the Green Mountain National Forest was developed. The process began by going around and meeting with people. Several groups and planning commissions held meetings. We let it be known wherever we could that if someone wanted to visit with us, we would take the time to do so. We had much one-on-one contact with people we knew from previous debates over the Vermont Wilderness Bill, where we had encountered controversy over timber sales and wind-powered generation. Based on those meetings, we developed a picture of what the forest should ultimately be like in the views of local people. This was done before we even got started planning, and we called this description our roles statement. It was really a vision statement, but in it we recognized that public land is scarce in Vermont, comprising only 11 percent of the state, half of which is national forest.

Starting from that philosophy, we concentrated on working with interested people on both local and state levels. The national groups were often on the periphery. Sometimes they took different views. Mostly we let the local groups work it out with their national counterparts.

On the Green Mountain forest, we worked together at the local level quite well. But this is not always the case in such endeavors. For example, the White Mountain National Forest in New Hampshire encountered bitter controversy with national interest groups over the New Hampshire Wilderness Bill. There, the Forest Service, along with a coalition of local groups that included timber interests, snowmobilers, hikers, and preservationists, had gotten together and worked out a wilderness bill that was satisfactory to all. Then a representative of a national organization came in and did not like what was happening. The representative stormed out of a meeting claiming that no wilderness bill had ever passed without his group's approval. Fortunately, that is no longer true, because in New Hampshire, people working together and with their delegations

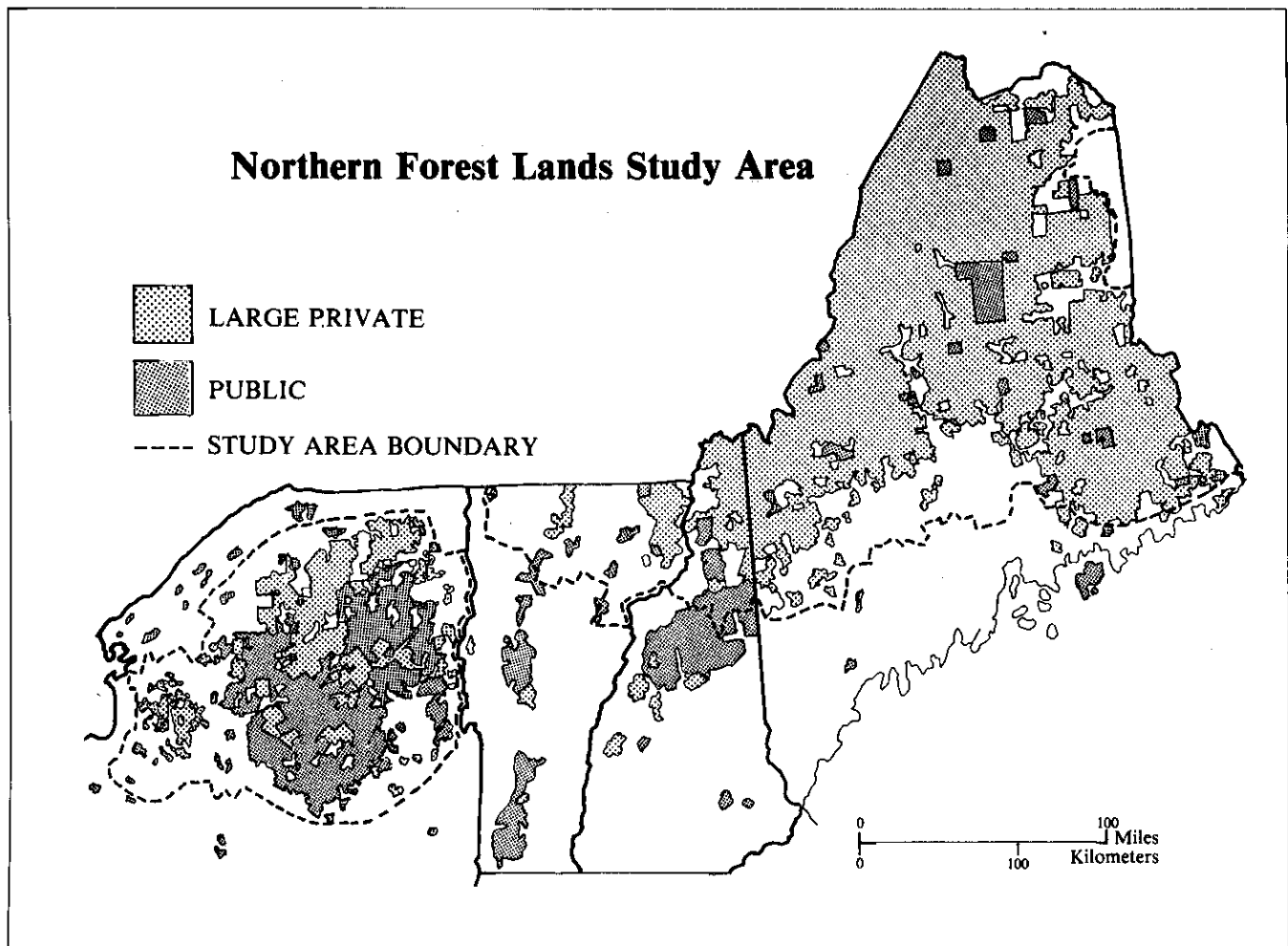


Figure 1

successfully developed a wilderness bill that works for local interests.

The Vermont Wilderness Bill, developed in much the same way, made about 20 percent of the Green Mountain forest either wilderness or national recreation area. One portion of the forest had characteristics that just did not fit into the wilderness model, so it was designated as a national recreation area—a term used very loosely and one that is redefined case by case. This area served more than just recreation; it was an important wildlife area that required some vegetative manipulation that, given the circumstances, was acceptable to all.

Congress directed us to develop a specific management plan for the area. To do this, we assembled many of the same people who helped with the wilderness bill and developed a plan for the White Rocks National Recreation Area. During our meetings, someone suggested reintroducing the pine marten, which had been extirpated from Vermont many years before. We said, "Why not," and worked with universities and the Vermont Department of Fish and

Wildlife to reestablish the species. Today, we have a viable, secure population of pine marten in that part of the national forest. It was truly a win/win situation. Even the Vermont Trappers Association, which was a part of the study team, supported the idea and agreed to curtail trapping in the area until the species was established.

THE NORTHERN FOREST LANDS STUDY

The Northern Forest stretches 500 miles from Lake Ontario to the St. Croix River on the Maine/New Brunswick border and encompasses a remote region of boreal and northern hardwood forests, with a scattering of small towns (Figure 1).

About 85 percent of the region's land is privately owned, more than half of which is controlled by national corporations. These corporations are typically managed by people who are not natural resource specialists but who are accountants and attorneys who live in places like Stamford, Connecticut, and New York City. In 1982 a European financier

named James Goldsmith launched a hostile takeover of the Diamond International paper company. Goldsmith immediately sold the paper-manufacturing facilities and in 1988 put more than one million acres of land up for sale. The acquisition and demise of Diamond International caused widespread concern because several studies indicated that development pressures in New England threatened the region's traditional patterns of land use and that the familiar landscape of the region was beginning to unravel.

About this time, the governors of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York formed a governors' task force to study ownership and land-use patterns in the Northern Forest. The task force was comprised of three people from each state, representing landowners and the timber industry, state government, and conservationists. Simultaneously, Senators Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) and Warren Rudman (R-New Hampshire) were instrumental in starting a companion effort headed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, and the senators ensured that the Forest Service appropriation bill contained the necessary funds to conduct the study. The Forest Service's charge was to assist the governors' task force and to develop alternative protection strategies that could be used to maintain the traditional land uses of the region.

By this time, many people felt that a different approach to land conservation was appropriate since the idea of directly purchasing new national forest or parklands was not feasible given the cost. However, simply leaving land-use decisions up to market forces was not working either, given the enormous pressures for resort development and corporate takeovers. A new approach based upon some kind of public/private partnership was needed.

With considerable public involvement, a vision statement was written, describing what New Englanders wanted the Northern Forest to be like in the future. The Northern Forest Lands Study report did not recommend any specific protection strategy but listed an array of alternatives. The governors' task force offered its own report to the governors, and it included some recommendations. This weak document, with no mention of "greenlining," was largely designed to keep the state of Maine involved in the process, which was important since Maine comprises a large portion of the region.

Following the release of the reports, the Northern Forest Council was established by the 1990 farm bill. The council does not have a very strong charge. The Northern Forests Lands Act, proposed in 1991, would have provided stronger direction, but during hearings in Vermont and New Hampshire, the wise-use and private-rights groups came out in force against the act. The Northern Forests Alliance, a coalition of about twenty-five conservation groups, is also in-

involved in trying to reach resolution, but the idea of a regional solution is still a long way off.

Nevertheless, there have been some real benefits from the process. Local people are moving ahead, and the process has been very educational. For example, the Forest Legacy Program, which is a federal program that assists in the buying of land easements, was included in the 1990 farm bill. In Granby, Vermont, the town got together with the state, the Forest Legacy Program, and some nonprofit organizations and purchased Cow Mountain Pond from Champion International, a forest-products company that has been very good to work with. Today, the lake is set aside for the enjoyment of future generations.

Another example of cooperative environmental protection involves four conservation groups, two states, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service working with the James River Corporation and Boise Cascade, two timber companies, to establish a new national wildlife refuge on Lake Umbagog near the border of New Hampshire and Maine. These developments represent some great accomplishments, and moderate conservationists are increasingly supporting environmental causes within such cooperative arrangements.

The Countryside Institute's professional exchange program is an excellent example of another successful project. The program began in 1987 as an exchange of professionals between the United Kingdom and the northeastern United States. It has since grown into a collaborative effort that includes two federal agencies, one university, and five nonprofit organizations. The purpose is to share ideas and to increase awareness among the various groups and individuals involved.

The program uses a case-study format with eight professionals—four from either side of the Atlantic. The group meets and visits a community that has invited it and spends a week to ten days talking about resource and land-use problems. The format is very open, and the group does not go into a community unless it agrees to get all players involved. Some good success has resulted from this process. In one case, a community stewardship program involving ten private organizations, five public organizations, and a coalition of local businesses is developing a resource protection strategy that covers three Adirondack communities and involves all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Education is the most important element in garnering public interest in natural resource issues. Citizens must be enlightened, starting with environmental education for youngsters and adults. The

media are very important as well since they provide information and can help to maintain a high level of openness and fairness in the process.

In addition, the smaller the geographic area, the more likely it is that potential solutions can be found. The successes of the examples above seem to center on working at the local level. Issues are more easily resolved in individual towns or groups of towns rather than at the state level. There is too much opportunity for polarization if states attempt to work together as a region, and the idea of the federal government entering the fray to resolve land-use issues appalls people as well. Multistate organizations, corporations, or environmental groups also do not do a very good job of relating to local people and may impede the process of arriving at a resolution.

Despite these caveats, there are obviously some issues that require national direction—controlling air pollution, protecting threatened and endangered species, establishing nationally significant places, and many others. A community working together,

whether that community is just one town or a localized area encompassing several towns, can accomplish much. All of the stakeholders need to be involved, and they need to agree on the facts and to define the issues. This process takes more than one meeting. The group must continue to meet together to build trust and to frame a common vision, which should include economic, social, and environmental elements because they are all interrelated. One element cannot be effectively dealt with without including the others.

Once a common vision is established, the group needs to work together to outline a process to achieve the vision and to define roles for the different players and organizations. In Vermont, the focus is on building coalitions at different levels of government that include private interests and for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. The resolutions that are most effective are local ones in which everyone is a part of the process and in which all agree with the result.