George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882).
Photo courtesy of the Billings Family Archives.

Conservation With A Human Face: Re-Considering Stewardship

by Rolf Diamant, David A. Donath, and Nora J. Mitchell

In 1847 the pioneer conservationist George Perkins Marsh made a speech to the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, Vermont. This was not the high point of Marsh's business career, as his fortunes were bound up in a series of agricultural crises. His sheep farm, and the woolen mill in which he was a major investor were in serious economic trouble, as was the sheep-and wool-based agriculture that was then the mainstay of Vermont's rural economy. Among the many comments that he made from his Rutland podium, Marsh observed,

"Every middle-age man who revisits his birth-place after a few years of absence, looks upon another landscape than that which formed the theater of his youthful toils and pleasures."

Vermont's landscape was in trouble, and Marsh could see it. Growing up in Woodstock, he had observed the systematic destruction of Vermont's forest cover, first for potash and lumber, then for croplands and upland pastures. Beginning in his youth, Marsh was a keen observer of nature. He watched as the thin soils of Vermont's glaciated hills eroded, leaving behind stony and infertile fields and pastures, and choking streams and rivers with muddy water. Later he learned that the severity of flooding was aggravated by the loss of forest cover and that fish habitat was systematically being destroyed by silt-laden run-off. The Vermont landscape that Marsh knew in 1847 had become nothing like the place of his birth.

In his most famous work, *Man and Nature,* first published in 1864, Marsh expanded upon these themes, applying them to the broad ecological relationship of human culture with the natural world far beyond his native Vermont hills. This was a vision in which the role of humans and their works exercised a defining influence on nature—for good or ill. In Marsh's view, good stewardship with sound "husbandry" could be the foundation for a more productive and civil society. Marsh's biographer, David Lowenthal has observed that, "Unlike Thoreau, who loved nature and wished it kept wild, Marsh wanted it tamed; Thoreau appealed chiefly to aesthetic sensibility, Marsh to practicality." In the writings of Marsh and Thoreau lie many of the intellectual roots of American conservation.

In 1997, one hundred and fifty years after Marsh gave his Rutland speech, a new generation of conservationists is taking a fresh look at the concept of stewardship. They are expanding their field of vision beyond the often fragmented preservation of individual areas and critical habitats to focus on larger landscapes and ecosystems, and the complex interdependent relationship between people, places, and nature. This approach suggests that there are no refuges in the literal sense of the term. Even the largest and most remote national parks and preserves are dependent on the responsible stewardship of the communities and productive lands that influence the greater ecosystems that surround them.

For Marsh, conservation was not about parks, reservations, and wilderness, but rather about the husbandry of

working landscapes and countryside. His analytical eye was fixed on the rural landscape, where conservation would be measured by the sustainability of its resources and the health and stability of its communities.

The term stewardship itself is derived from the old Norse word stivardr, meaning "keeper of the house." This definition suggests a sense of continuity with the past as well as a commitment to the future. "Keeper of the house" implies a respect for both nature and culture, all things associated with the feeling of home and belonging. Stewardship embraces all things that people value and wish to see passed on. In his essay, "The Trouble With Wilderness," historian William Cronon observes: "... we need to discover a common middle ground in which all of these things, from the city to the wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word 'home.' Home, after all, is the place where we finally make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children."

In today's context, this view of stewardship suggests a broader interpretation of conservation goals, transcending an exclusive focus on single objectives, such as biodiversity, recreation, or watershed protection, to embrace the full range of connections between people and the places they live and care about. This stewardship approach is evident in a number of initiatives scattered across the country.

Along the Arizona/Mexico border, on a landscape of nearly a million acres known for its ecologically rich mountaintop "sky islands," an alliance of ranchers and environmentalists known as the Malpai Borderlands Group have organized around some common interests. They are working to improve the health of the range, rejuvenate its grasslands, preserve endangered species, and prevent further fragmentation of the landscape and loss of bio-diversity. They are also working to preserve the 35 ranches which encompass the "sky island" archipelago in the face of mounting development pressure from the Tucson area. Some of the ranches have been owned by a single family going back five generations.

On the other side of the country in the Catskill Mountains and in the Delaware and Hudson valleys of New York State, a coalition of local communities and the City of New York (long at war over the regulation of the city's 2,000 square mile watershed) recently reached a landmark agreement to protect the city's water supply. For two centuries, this cultural landscape of farms and small villages been shaped and sustained by agriculture. In the agreement, the City backed off its threat of wide scale condemnation, and along with a number of other measures, local dairy farmers agreed to upgrade their farming operations to reduce agricultural run-off.

In these examples, conservation goals are considered within the framework of broader community goals, and success is based on making common cause with people who live on and work the land. Of course there are other rural landscapes where stewardship does not take root, particularly in more transient, less cohesive communities, or where polarized opinion or lack of will cannot be overcome. In the places where stewardship has the greatest potential, some of the following conditions are usually present:

- People are considered an important part of the ecosystems and larger landscapes which over time have been shaped by human activity and nature.
- There is a strong connection between good stewardship and sustainability—trying to live "rightly" on the land.
- There is a sense of continuity and a strong identification with heritage, acknowledging the diverse and dynamic nature of human culture and the positive aspects of change and community development.
- Stewardship is viewed as an inclusive process which encourages broad participation and partnerships—about largely voluntary actions based on cooperation and shared goals.
- There is a clear understanding of the values people place on natural and cultural resources in the context of other social and economic goals.
- There is a strong sense of personal and collective responsibility for both family and larger community interests and a willingness to make decisions which take future generations into account.

Frederick Billings, circa 1885. Photo courtesy of the Billings Mansion Archives.

Today in Woodstock, Vermont, a national park is being established that is devoted to the themes of conservation history and stewardship. About the same time that George Perkins Marsh was making his Rutland speech, another native of Woodstock was preparing to go West into the California Gold-Rush. Frederick Billings was nearly a generation younger than Marsh. He made his fortune in the West, first in law and later in railroads.

In the mid 1860s Billings returned to Vermont and toured the places of his childhood and youth. Since his departure more than a dozen years before, deforestation and upland grazing had continued unchecked. More than three-quarters of the state's forested lands had been stripped. With a matured way of looking at landscapes, Billings must have felt a little bit like Frodo and Sam returning to the Shire after the destruction of Mordor.

About the time of his return to Vermont, Billings read Marsh's *Man and Nature.* Intrigued with the book because it was written by one of his former Woodstock neighbors, he was profoundly impressed by Marsh's message. Billings used his Gold-Rush fortune to purchase the boyhood home of George Perkins Marsh and transform it into a country estate and farm. Embracing the concepts of *Man and Nature,* Billings developed the old Marsh property as a self-conscious model of land stewardship and scientifically informed husbandry. He bought a number of failing hill farms and began to replant the uplands as a managed tree farm. On the lowlands, he developed a progressive dairy operation. His examples helped show the way for the re-greening of Vermont in the twentieth century.

Today, Marsh-Billings National Historical Park and the Billings Farm & Museum are working in a close partnership to preserve the boyhood home of

Billings Farm & Museum's Jersey cows heading to the barn for afternoon milking. Photo by John Gilbert Fox, courtesy of Billings Farm & Museum.

George Perkins Marsh and the estate, farm, and forest created by Frederick Billings. With an operating dairy farm and managed forest, the Museum and Park are uniquely positioned to demonstrate the practical application of conservation, characteristic of Billings, and to interpret a vision of stewardship that can be traced back to Marsh—a vision that is respectful of nature, history, and community.

The twentieth century largely erased environmental devastation that Marsh wrote about and that Billings sought to repair. In many ways, Vermont has become a "healed landscape." The forests which had been reduced to less than a quarter of Vermont's total acreage, once again cover more than three-quarters of the state's land. Yet, this story is far from over. The family-based dairy farms which have defined modern Vermont are steadily disappearing from the countryside along with their culture and distinctive way of life. The characteristic mix of farm fields and forests, shaped and sustained by agriculture, is disappearing with the farms. Those who care about Vermont's rural character and the people who work the land, are now struggling to find ways to adapt to this new and difficult challenge.

A young visitor to Billings Farm & Museum gets an up-close and personal experience in sheep shearing. Photo courtesy of Billings Farm & Museum.

The wisdom of George Perkins Marsh haunts us. For good or ill—whether intentionally or unintentionally, wisely or foolishly—humans shape the earth. We are stewards, and we hope we can learn the ways of good stewardship. But first we must learn to see and understand the places where we live. This is not easy, because as a society we are homogenized, scattered and systematically alienated from the landscapes and communities that nurtured us in our youth. Still, by returning—perhaps by looking again with new eyes—we can gain the lessons we need to be good stewards of our homes.

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Marsh-Billings National Historical Park

and the Billings Farm & Museum encompass the historic Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller Farm and Estate in Woodstock, Vermont. Marsh-Billings is the first unit of the National Park System to focus on the theme of conservation history and the changing nature of land stewardship in America.

When Marsh-Billings National Historical Park opens to the public in 1998, it will be managed as a partnership between the National Park Service and the Woodstock Foundation, which operates the Billings Farm & Museum located on private land within the boundaries of the Park. The Museum operates the Farm as both a historic site and a working dairy farm. With an audience of nearly 60,000 visitors and schoolchildren the Billings Farm & Museum interprets current and historic dairying practices, as well as the historical relationships of rural farm culture and the stewardship of working landscapes and countryside.

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