

Part III

NORTHEASTERN WILD
LANDS IN CONTEXT



Stewardship and Sustainability

Lessons from the “Middle Landscape” of Vermont

NORA MITCHELL AND ROLF DIAMANT

By perceiving ourselves as part of the river, we take responsibility for the river as a whole.

—Vaclav Havel¹

IN THE QUIET twilight, a lone series of hoots echoes through the Mount Tom forest. On silent wings, a young barred owl flies low over a carriage road that winds through the forest stands planted in the nineteenth century and the second-growth woodlands of abandoned farm fields. This owl, a species that inhabits the forest interior, has returned with the woodlands. As in many other areas of Vermont, by the mid-nineteenth century, Woodstock’s Mount Tom was cleared of most of its tree cover. When nineteenth-century conservationist George Perkins Marsh explored this mountainside as a child, he probably did not hear the barred owl calling. During Marsh’s childhood in the early 1800s, the forest was fast disappearing, first cleared for agriculture and later for livestock grazing. Marsh was later to reflect in his landmark book, *Man and Nature*, on the wasteful agricultural and deforestation practices that he had observed in Vermont and on his first-hand experience with similar environmental destruction in the Middle East and Europe.² First published in 1864, *Man and Nature* warned of the threats posed not only to the environment, but also to the foundations of civilization itself. In Marsh’s view, good land management and husbandry were the cornerstones for a productive and civil society. He called for improved stewardship of land—stewardship with the future in mind, what today we call sustainable land management.

One of the earliest and most energetic responses to Marsh’s call for action came from fellow Vermonter Frederick Billings, who purchased the Marsh homestead in 1869. Through Billings’s reforestation efforts, the

forest returned to Mount Tom in the late nineteenth century almost as dramatically as it had disappeared. Planting thousands of trees throughout his 1,500-acre estate, Billings created a forest that today represents one of the earliest planned and continuously managed woodlands in America. Billings's heirs continued management of this forest over two succeeding generations, including the last fifty years during the tenure of Billings's granddaughter, Mary French, and her husband Laurance Rockefeller. In 1998, the Rockefeller family donated these woodlands as part of Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park. The park, which interprets conservation history and the evolving nature of land stewardship in America, continues the tradition of sustainable forestry on 550 acres of the original Billings forest.³

The rewilding that has taken place on Mount Tom, and in much of Vermont in concert with traditional agriculture and forestry, has resulted in a richly woven landscape tapestry of ecology and history.⁴ This long-settled "middle landscape" challenges the dichotomy that has dominated our perceptions of the relationship between nature and culture and many of the tenets of our conservation philosophy and practice. John Elder has pointed out the power of "the stories of this long-settled landscape," and how these

may help us to imagine a more inclusive paradigm for American conservation. In the syntax of these mountains, "loss" and "recovery," "wilderness" and "stewardship" may all be spoken, and connected . . . [I do] not see such reevaluation as rejection of the wilderness ethic, but hope instead that we will now find new ways to integrate our vision of wilderness into a more socially inclusive perspective on the environment.⁵

In this chapter, we explore this concept of a "middle landscape" and probe its value for cultivating stewardship and learning sustainability. Our perspective is shaped and informed by the history of land stewardship in places such as Mount Tom and by the conservation efforts of many organizations and communities today. The lessons of land management, described by Marsh in the nineteenth century, today are written on the rewilded forest landscape of Vermont and many places in the Northeast. Past land management efforts tell stories of sustainability—some through failure and others through continuity. These stories can be used as guides and as encouragement to seek sustainability alongside rewilding. Viewed in this light, our northeastern landscape can be our compass for new directions in environmental thought and development of a broader, more inclusive conservation ethic.



Figure 9.1. Historic carriage road through Mount Tom Forest, reforested by Frederick Billings in the late nineteenth century. *Photo: Property of the Woodstock Historical Society, Inc.*



Figure 9.2. Overlooking Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, the Billings Farm and Museum, and the village of Woodstock in the Ottaquechee Valley, Vermont. *Photo by Barbara Slaihy.*

Rewilding and Reconnecting on the Middle Landscape

Defining the “Middle Landscape”

The long-settled landscape of Mount Tom has been described as the humanized landscape—the ecotone where civilization and wilderness meet. These are lands that have long had a human imprint, areas traditionally used for agriculture and forestry or developed as towns and cities. These areas have been given various names—nonwildlands, cultural landscapes, working landscapes, or protected landscapes.⁶ In this chapter, we will use the term “middle landscape.” This middle landscape traditionally has not received great attention from the conservation community. Yet the middle landscape provides a vital connection between remote areas of wilderness and the places where most people live and work. In the middle landscape, we have an opportunity to sustain and cultivate knowledge of wildness close to home and to explore the relationship with more remote wilderness. This ecotone landscape is also the place where we can learn to live on the land in a sustainable way.

Rewilding and the Middle Landscape

Recent literature is rich in celebration of the rewilding of Vermont and other areas of the Northeast. Bill McKibben has described this reforestation as “an explosion of green” and noted that eastern wilderness offers an opportunity to integrate culture and wild lands.⁷ John Terborgh and Michael Soulé have described a vision of “large-scale networks and mega-reserves” employing a strategy of linking core areas with corridors as an exciting new approach to conservation biology with a focus on keystone species that range over large geographic areas.⁸ The Wildlands Project, closely allied with *Wild Earth*, a quarterly journal on conservation biology and wild lands activism, is “drafting a blueprint for an interconnected continental-scale system of protected wildlands linked by habitat corridors.”⁹

This vision of large-scale reserves creates a future for wild lands dependent upon and interconnected with the cultivated middle landscape. In this vision, the humanized landscape is a critical component in the strategy and is recognized for its important role as corridor and buffer for the wild lands of the core.

Reconnecting on the Middle Landscape

In addition to playing a critical role in maintaining a viable network of ecological buffers and corridors, the middle landscape can promote a respect for and understanding of place, nurture a land ethic, and enhance democratic values and civil society.

These are the lands where people can build a strong association to place and a connection to nature. These are also places where people know the land and learn to respect the landscape through work, particularly agriculture and forestry. William Vitek has written that in rural communities there “is an opportunity for the land’s rhythms to become part of everyday life, an immediate linkage between the land’s fertility and the community’s prosperity. Those who work directly on the land know it in ways that are simply unavailable to those who wish to keep their hands clean and their preconceptions unchallenged.”¹⁰ This does not imply, as Wendell Berry wrote in *Orion*, “that everyone ought to be a farmer or forester.” However, Berry observed, “people now are living on the far side of a broken connection, and that this is potentially catastrophic.”¹¹ Vitek and Berry are noting that the type of relationship developed through work or other

direct experiences with land is fundamental to knowledge and understanding of place, and to the respect that follows. The connection to nature for most Americans has become increasingly conceptual, experienced through books, magazines, and television. “There is no significant urban constituency,” Berry warns, “no formidable consumer lobby, no noticeable political leadership, for good land use practices, for good farming and forestry, for restoration of abused land, or for halting the destruction of land by so-called ‘development.’”¹² More than ever, we need places to reinforce the tangible over the conceptual, to bring people in contact with land in a way that enhances understanding and that ultimately nurtures a constituency for the better stewardship of both wild and nonwild middle landscape.

This need for new constituencies identified by Berry is particularly relevant to how we approach education. As we seek an ever-increasing emphasis on place-based learning, the importance of these middle landscapes is growing. Incorporating farming and forestry and other real life experiences connected to sustainable land use in school curricula in conjunction with internships and field projects can help in reestablishing a fundamental connection to the land and a respect for work associated with land. This can be viewed as a long-term investment in creating a land ethic that students carry with them throughout life. Such an ethic encourages a constructive role in civic life and creates a multi-generation constituency necessary for making important decisions on the future of all lands—wild lands and the middle landscape.

In the quest for stewardship and sustainable practices on the middle landscape we, as a society, are challenged to resolve conflicts and contradictions on many different levels. We are engaged in a difficult and complex dialogue about how we care for both public and private land. The success of this dialogue will be measured by our ability to develop new ways of working together, new models of sustainable economic enterprise, and effective methods for conflict resolution and democratic decision making. An informed public discussion on the role, importance, and necessary scale of wild lands can only be accomplished in the context of this more inclusive discourse. “Truly protected wilderness,” argues Brian Donahue in his book *Reclaiming the Commons*, “will follow from a society that has at last worked out a healthy relation with its everyday landscape, with its productive forests and farmlands.”¹³ If we are successful in creating the necessary understanding and political will for change, it will benefit all our landscapes, including wild lands, and we will have come a long way

in building and maintaining a civil society that is defined by its commitment to equity, tolerance, sustainability, and environmental health.

Defining Stewardship and Sustainability

We are unlikely to achieve anything close to sustainability in any area unless we work for the broader goal of becoming native in the modern world, and that means becoming native to our places in a coherent community that is in turn embedded in the ecological realities of its surrounding landscape.

—Wes Jackson¹⁴

The term “stewardship” itself is derived from an old Norse word *sti-varðr*, meaning “keeper of the house.”¹⁵ The word’s origin incorporates a sense of responsibility for one’s personal house as well as the collective home, and suggests continuity with the past as well as a commitment to the future. “Keeper of the house” also implies a respect for both nature and culture, all things associated with the feeling of home and belonging. It is interesting to note that the term “ecology” has a similar root word of “eco” from the Greek “oiko” for house.

Environmental historian William Cronon has noted the importance of connecting our relationship with nature to our sense of home in his essay in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, where he speaks of discovering a “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 finally we 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.”¹⁶ Gary Snyder, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, also includes both remote areas and domicile in his definition of home: “Nature is not a place to visit, it is *home*—and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places.”¹⁷ The idea that home encompasses a spectrum of landscapes from wilderness to intensively managed areas also expands the notion of familiarity, attachment, and responsibility for an equally wide array of places.

In an article in *Orion*, John Elder highlighted the intergeneration nature of the concept of stewardship when he wrote “we must conceive of stewardship not simply as one individual’s practice, but rather as the mutual and intimate relationship, extending across the generations, between

a human community and its place on earth.”¹⁸ Defining stewardship in this way embraces everything people personally value and wish to see passed on to the next generation—or in terms being used for sustainability, to the seventh generation.

The word “sustainable” has its origins in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European forests. At that time, deforestation caused concerns among the foresters and, in response, they developed scientific or sustainable forestry, primarily in Germany. Their working principle was to plant enough trees to replace those harvested every year and to monitor closely rates of growth and change to ensure that the harvest was sustainable over time.¹⁹

There is no one definition of sustainability. The one most often cited is from *Our Common Future*, the report of the 1987 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (frequently referred to as the Brundtland Commission after its chair, Gro Harlem Brundtland). Sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”²⁰ The Brundtland report initiated a global conversation on sustainability. This concept was further developed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (frequently referred to as the Earth Summit), when the Rio Declaration was adopted. The Declaration’s twenty-seven principles establish a global commitment to further create a sustainable society.²¹

This definition and these principles of sustainability have been further refined. For example, the goals of the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, Northeast Region, state that “Sustainable agriculture and forestry systems will: promote good stewardship of the land . . . rely on—and encourage—greater diversity among farms and on individual farms . . . [and] contribute to the quality of life for producers, communities, and society as a whole.”²² It has also been argued that “the best way to communicate the meaning of sustainable agriculture is through the real-life stories of farmers who are developing sustainable farming systems on their own farms.”²³ In the Northeast, a number of sustainable agriculture initiatives have been undertaken, including “marketing coops, value-added enterprises, CSAs [community supported agriculture], urban gardens, farmers markets, [and] food coops” as well as sustainable forestry initiatives such as community-based forestry and “green certified” lumber (see chapter 10).²⁴

In today’s context, the terms stewardship and sustainability can be used to extend the meaning of conservation, which in the past has often had

an exclusive focus such as biodiversity or recreation, to embrace the complexity of the wide range of connections between people and the places they live and care about. Artist and conservationist Alan Gussow has used the term “place” to describe a holistic perception of the environment.

A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feeling . . . Viewed as a resource that sustains our humanity, the earth is a collection of places. We never speak, for example, of an environment we have known; it is always places we have known—and recall. We are homesick for places, we are reminded of places, it is the sounds and smells and sights of places which haunt us and against which we often measure our present.²⁵

A more inclusive definition of conservation is shaped by our association with places—including wild lands, townscapes, cityscapes, and the middle landscape. Our attachment to these places is fertile ground for cultivating a stewardship ethic and a commitment to living sustainably.

Stewardship and Sustainability on the Ground in Vermont

In reexamining wilderness from an eastern perspective, we have the opportunity to reintegrate concepts of wildness, human history, and stewardship. This new approach to conservation is being tested and honed in Vermont, in the rest of the Northeast, in other places with complex environmental histories, and where individuals and communities are investing in stewardship. We next examine the stewardship efforts of three organizations that are beginning to tap the vast potential for reconnecting the wild and human communities, balancing ecology and economy, and valuing cultural connections of people to the land.²⁶ Their work provides an example of the innovation and creativity that characterizes conservation work in the Northeast today.

Discovering and Stewarding the Wild in Our Neighborhoods and Communities

“Tracking is teaching me that landscapes where nothing seems to be going on are full of business, if you learn to read the memos and reports written in the mud.”²⁷ This testimony from a graduate of one of Keeping Track’s six-day outdoor training sessions illustrates the insights that are at the heart of this organization’s mission. Keeping Track has been working in



Figure 9.3. Keeping Track volunteers inspect sign of moose—a species expanding its range in Vermont. *Photo © Susan C. Morse.*

Vermont since 1994, when Susan Morse created a nonprofit organization to train and educate citizens about the presence of wildlife in their communities and to cultivate a concern for protecting their habitats. The focus is on tracking wide-ranging mammals—such as black bear, fisher, river otter, mink, and bobcat—that need extensive tracts of undeveloped land to survive. According to Morse, “these species are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss because they require relatively large home ranges and have low population densities and reproductive rates . . . Protecting habitat for these species ensures that habitat will be protected for other species, too.”²⁸ As their habitat becomes increasingly fragmented, these mammal

populations decrease, providing an indicator of the health of the wild lands on which they depend.

Wildlife observations recorded by Keeping Track's trained citizen volunteers are entered into town databases. Keeping Track assists participating towns with the maintenance and analysis of this information. These data can then be incorporated into local and regional land use planning and conservation initiatives. In the future, Keeping Track plans to establish a network of volunteers from different communities and to establish a central database that will identify core habitats and corridors that link them. This regional level of information opens the possibility of working with a broader sphere of people, towns, agencies, and organizations. Recently, Keeping Track co-initiated a countywide collaborative project with the Winooski Valley Park District and all the towns in Chittenden County.²⁹ This work will be coordinated with the Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping resources of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission.

Today, Keeping Track is working with over sixty communities, including forty-two in Vermont, sixteen in New Hampshire, and several in New York, and two organizations in California.³⁰ By bringing locally gathered knowledge of wildlife to the table in the local planning process, landowners, citizens, and planners can make better informed decisions.³¹ In addition to the community program, Keeping Track offers field trips and classroom presentations on wildlife tracking and the importance of habitat protection within their community to schoolchildren of all ages and their teachers. Keeping Track also works with organizations such as the Vermont Institute of Natural Science, Northern Woodlands, Vermont Leadership Center, the Greater Laurentian Wildlands Project, and Vermont Coverts to encourage cooperation among their efforts on wildlife and to encourage conservation planning for larger geographic areas.

Vermont Coverts is a complementary program that works with landowners to manage their forests with wildlife habitat in mind and to consider cooperating with their neighbors in this effort. This organization, which began fifteen years ago, also places an emphasis on citizen education and offers a three day program on wildlife and forest management for private landowners. This is an important audience, since the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources estimates that of the 4.6 million acres of forested land in Vermont (78 percent of the state's acreage), roughly three-quarters is privately owned by individuals; some of whom are actively managing their forestland, some of whom are not.³²



Figure 9.4. Forestland owners work with consulting forester as part of Vermont Coverts “Woodlands for Wildlife Cooperator Training Workshop.” *Photo by Gary W. Moore.*

Individuals who complete Covert’s training return to their neighborhoods and communities and find various ways to share what they have learned. Some of these graduates offer programs in the local schools, others serve as peer counselors to other landowners and talk with their neighbors about managing their adjacent land through collaboration. David Clarkson, a graduate of Coverts training from Newfane, Vermont, has worked with his neighbors for the last thirteen years, building collaboration among forty landowners. Through informal neighbor-to-neighbor arrangements, Clarkson and other landowners have affected the management of almost 6,000 acres within three towns, a project they call “Wildlife Habitat Improvement Group” (W.H.I.G.). The landowners are a diverse group, including “locals and summer people, loggers and doctors, farmers and philosophy professors,” who, according to Clarkson, found they all shared “a deep affection for the land.”³³ These neighbors have hired a professional forester to work with them to develop a management plan, and the landowners cooperate on implementation. They work together on projects such as leaving brush cover for grouse and woodcock and retaining sections of mature forest for large mammals such as bears and secretive species such as thrush and winter wrens. Although

the goal of W.H.I.G. was to preserve wildlife habitat, the collaborative project has also been successful in cultivating a sense of place and responsibility for stewardship.³⁴

Vermont Coverts currently has six other projects in the state in various stages of implementation, involving between 12,000 and 15,000 acres.³⁵ Vermont Coverts represents a wider trend of cooperation among private landowners across boundaries to protect wildlife habitat on a regional scale. Clarkson calls his effort a “neighborhood cooperative”; others refer to this as “community-based forestry.”³⁶ This program “fosters land stewardship through a sense of community,” according to Farley Brown, program coordinator for Vermont Coverts. David Dobbs, co-author of *The Northern Forest*, has pointed out that “cross-boundary management is in part a return to social connections that over the centuries have been fragmented along with landscape and culture.” This is echoed by his co-author, Richard Ober, a senior director at the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, who noted that “when our first towns were established here in New England, neighbors had to work together very, very closely. This is merely a renewed recognition that we share vital community interests that cross private boundaries.”³⁷

George Perkins Marsh and Henry David Thoreau—both astute observers of their world—wrote about the power of discovery and the insight that comes from careful observation. Thoreau also spent time tracking wildlife, as his journal entry for 30 January 1841 attests. He wrote, “Here is the distinct trail of a fox stretching a quarter of a mile across the pond. I know which way a mind wended this morning, what horizon it faced, by the setting of these tracks; whether it moved slowly or rapidly, by the greater or less intervals . . . for the swiftest step leaves yet a lasting trace.”³⁸ Marsh’s observation skills were honed under the tutelage of his father, and throughout his life Marsh kept detailed environmental records. In writing *Man and Nature*, his goal was “to stimulate, not to satisfy curiosity.” “[T]he power most important to cultivate,” he says, “and, at the same time, hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him. Sight is a faculty; seeing an art.”³⁹

John Elder has written about cultivating an “attentiveness to place.” He argues that “focusing on the specific, local connections of geology, soil, and climate, flora and fauna, indigenous cultures, immigrant cultures, and contemporary literature and art is a habit . . . It is a practice of mindfulness and personal commitment that can enhance a person’s relationship to a new home.”⁴⁰ Elder also points out the potential for the educational system to cultivate this “attentiveness” and that “locally grounded, inter-

disciplinary teaching” can initiate a “process of helping people cultivate and extend their inherent perceptiveness. . . . tuning people in to their place and giving them a sense of strength.”⁴¹ David Orr has described this as education that “equips people to ‘become native to a place.’”⁴²

The programs of Keeping Track and Vermont Coverts demonstrate how personal observation and experience can enhance a person’s knowledge of place and connection to their community. While the objective of both organizations is to identify and protect wildlife habitat, they carry out their work in a way that builds knowledge of place, develops individual and collective responsibility, and contributes to the stewardship of wild lands and the middle landscape.

The Work Ethic and the Land Ethic

This farm is in our blood. I can’t visualize ever leaving here. I want to make sure my children will be able to make a good living here, too. We hope at least one of them will be the seventh generation on the farm.

—Tim Leach⁴³

Tim Leach and his wife, Dot, own a 428-acre dairy farm along the Mettowee River in southwestern Vermont. They are the sixth generation of the Leach family to operate Woodlawn Farm, which today milks 350 Holsteins and sells its registered stock around the world. Tim and Dot, along with many of their neighbors, have voluntarily sold the development rights on their land to the Vermont Land Trust in order to enhance the farm’s financial stability and preserve the agricultural heritage and rural character of the Mettowee Valley. With this decision, the Leach family has joined with thirty-four other landowners in the towns of Rupert, Pawlet, and Dorset, and with the Vermont Land Trust to conserve a total of 5,700 acres in the Mettowee Valley. In addition to retaining the agricultural landscape, a buffer area has been established along the entire length of the river to protect areas of floodplain forest and maintain water quality and good habitat for fish and other aquatic life.⁴⁴

Since its founding in 1977, the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) has conserved more than 330,000 acres of farmland and forestland, including over 240 farms, protecting approximately 6.5 percent of Vermont’s privately owned land.⁴⁵ The success of VLT has made it a model for many other smaller land trusts in the Northeast and across the country. VLT’s mission is “to conserve land for the future of Vermont.” This statewide achievement was recognized with the presentation of the 1999 Vermonter of the



Figure 9.5. Tim and Dot Leach and family, Woodlawn Farm, Pawlet, Vermont. *Photo by Jeffrey P. Roberts.*

Year award to VLT's president Darby Bradley. The award praised VLT and noted that its work

has prevented sprawl from consuming key productive soils. It has assured Vermonters of recreational access to some of the state's finest lands. It has preserved natural beauty. It has provided an example for building consensus among disparate interests. It has assured a future for land-based industries that are central to Vermont's character and values. It has fostered a greater sense of community in this state.⁴⁶

In 1997, the VLT joined the Nature Conservancy of Vermont in creating the Atlas Timberlands Partnership (ATP) to purchase 26,000 acres of forest in the Green Mountains of northern Vermont. Bob Klein, director of the Vermont chapter of the Nature Conservancy (TNC), explains how the Atlas Timberlands Partnership draws on the strength of both organizations.

This project protects those portions of the forested landscape where the missions of the Vermont Land Trust and TNC overlap. TNC focused historically on the protection of biological resources without a great deal of



Figure 9.6. Mettowee Valley, looking south from Woodlawn Farm, Pawlet, Vermont. *Photo by Jeffrey P. Roberts.*

thought to timber production, while VLT emphasized the conservation of productive agricultural land and forestland through conservation easements. We realize these are not separate directions if we are to maintain the integrity of Vermont's ecosystems and forests in the future. Vermont's history showed a balance between ecology and economics long before the term sustainability was in vogue. ATP will help us understand how to maintain this balance in the future, so that the natural world Vermonters enjoy will thrive.⁴⁷

Darby Bradley, also chair of Vermont's Forest Resources Advisory Council, notes that the forest products industry is Vermont's largest employer in the manufacturing sector and is critical to the economy of rural Vermont. "This industry provides over eight thousand jobs to Vermonters, including six thousand jobs in furniture-making and other finished wood products. With the ownership of so much of Vermont's woodlands in a state of flux, we must find ways to maintain large blocks of woodland to provide the raw material for the industry, protect our environment, and preserve a way of life for Vermonters."⁴⁸ For both organizations, this project represents a vision for a new direction in forest stewardship, bal-



Figure 9.7. David McMath marking trees for Atlas Timberlands Project, Richford, Vermont. Photo by Jeffrey P. Roberts.

ancing timber production with the protection of biological resources and the continuation of traditional recreational access.

The Atlas project was followed a year later by an even larger undertaking, the Champion Lands Project. The Conservation Fund, a national conservation organization based in Arlington, Virginia, purchased 294,000 acres of forested land from Champion International Paper Company for \$72.25 million—132,000 acres in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, 144,000 acres in New York, and 18,000 acres in New Hampshire.⁴⁹ As the Vermont partner to the Conservation Fund, VLT had three principal goals in the acquisition and planning for the acres in Vermont:

- protecting the important wildlife habitat and natural areas that occur on the property;
- maintaining a large component of the Champion lands as a working forest, where timber and other wood products will be harvested to support the forest products industry and the local economy; and
- preserving traditional public access to the property for hunting, fishing, trapping, snowmobiling, hiking, and other forms of recreation.⁵⁰

The Conservation Fund and VLT worked closely with the Nature Conservancy of Vermont, the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR), and others to identify which lands were the most ecologically significant



Figure 9.8. The Yellow Bogs, former Champion International Paper property, Lewis, Vermont. *Photo by Jeffrey P. Roberts.*

and which could continue to be managed as a working forest and provide recreational opportunities. Based upon a scientific evaluation, the Conservation Fund and VLT concluded that approximately 48,000 acres in Vermont should be protected as wildlife habitat and would best be placed in public ownership. The 26,000 acres in the Nulhegan Basin, which contains many rare species, Vermont's largest deer wintering areas, other important wildlife habitat, and recreational areas, was conveyed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge. The ANR will acquire 22,000 acres of land in the Nulhegan and Paul's Stream watersheds, a property that contains numerous lakes, wetlands, and natural areas.

The Conservation Fund and VLT agreed to sell the remaining 84,000 acres in Vermont to a group of investors headed by Wil Merck of Hamilton, Massachusetts and Peacham, Vermont, called the Essex Timber Company. The property is subject to permanent easements stipulating a sustainable harvest for the working forest; protecting "Special Treatment Areas" of old growth, riparian corridors, wetlands, and other sensitive ecological areas (totaling approximately 5,000 acres); and providing public access for hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and other traditional recreational pursuits. The working forest easement is held by the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and

ANR administers the public access easement. The forest easement requires that the owner prepare a forest management plan consistent with the conditions of the easement prior to conducting a commercial timber harvest. The goal is to encourage sustainable harvest of high-quality timber that can benefit the economy of the region through value-added processing and products such as furniture making.⁵¹

John Roe, director of conservation programs at the Nature Conservancy's Vermont chapter, reflected on the importance and complexity of establishing a goal of sustainable forestry for this project: "The protection of the Champion lands is an exciting example of ecological sustainability at the landscape scale . . . it is still an exceedingly complex melding of the region's ecology, the economic use of the forest, and the longstanding cultural uses of the land." Nancy Bell, the Vermont representative for the Conservation Fund, looked back on the last two years of work and how this project, in many ways, represents the future of conservation. "This project heralds the challenges conservationists must face as we enter into the next millennium." According to Bell, "The diverse uses and interests both dovetail and compete with each other. The effort to strike an equilibrium between timber production, traditional recreation and ecological protection has been demanding. It is my hope that as the forests come back, the rivers clarify and the wildlife flourishes, future generations will deem that we have done right by the land and the people who use it."⁵²

Conclusion: Lessons from the Middle Landscape of Vermont

We need to reweave the threads of wildness, wilderness, biological diversity, agriculture, rivers, forests, roads, human settlements, and economy into a new view of the landscape. We need visions that stretch our notions of ecological possibilities.

—David Orr⁵³

Earlier in this chapter and elsewhere in this book, we have argued that the middle landscape is an important complement to conservation of wild lands, providing viable networks of ecological corridors for habitat and movement of key species as well as buffers for protected wild lands. The middle landscape, as demonstrated through a series of Vermont narratives, has another equally important role to play in conservation. Vermont is rich with stories from the middle landscape, illustrating a new and still-evolving approach to stewardship. Whether seen from the perspective of neighbors working together on community-based forestry, a novice

tracker on the trail of a bobcat, or a forester working on the Champion lands in the Northern Forest, the face of conservation today is constantly changing. People are finding connections between wild lands and the working landscape and developing a more inclusive definition of conservation, one that integrates the concepts of stewardship and sustainability. This more-inclusive vision restores the vital connections among culture, nature, and community. As William Vitek has observed,

Rediscovering the landscape and our place in it requires new ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and the natural world, and offers new challenges as well. Slowing down, staying put, opening our senses, practicing humility and restraint, knowing and caring for those around us, and finding our place in the natural world are simple yet significant steps in the rediscovery of place and the sense of community it holds.⁵⁴

To fully explore new ideas about conservation, we will need new language, a new vocabulary that makes these concepts accessible to the majority of people. We need to move beyond terminology that limits our vision. For example, William Cronon suggests that the dichotomy we have created to conceptualize nature and culture hinders the development of integrated models. He writes that “we need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others.”⁵⁵ Breaking the dichotomy and reconnecting the wild and humanized landscape offers the conservation movement an opportunity to significantly expand its base, include a broader and more diverse public, and maintain relevance in a changing world. New language also contributes to our ability to communicate, to listen, to cultivate tolerance and civility, and to seek common ground. As John Elder has observed, “we must pursue stewardship not simply as the maintenance of valuable resources but also as a way of fostering a broader experience of democracy and community.”⁵⁶

Following in the footsteps of George Perkins Marsh—literally and figuratively—on the slopes of Mount Tom, we are raising our field of vision beyond the often fragmented preservation of individual areas and critical habitats, to focus on the connecting fabric of larger landscapes and ecosystems, and the complex interdependent relationship that exists between people and their sense of place. Vermont and the Northeast can make a fundamental contribution to a new paradigm for conservation. This new

vision is described by Will Rogers, president of the Trust for Public Land: “Land conservation, like the soil under our feet, must be the bridge between home, good work, meaningful lives, and a hopeful future.”⁵⁷ This approach suggests that there really are no refuges in the literal sense of the term. Even the largest and most remote wild areas are dependent on the responsible stewardship of the communities and productive lands that influence the greater ecosystems that surround them. In Vermont and elsewhere, the success of conservation will ultimately be measured by the integrity and vitality of wild lands, the sustainability of the middle landscape, and the health and stability of communities.