

Use and Reservation: Land Stewardship in New Hampshire

Richard Ober

In October my father and I cut firewood from our ancestral woodlot in southern New Hampshire. We load up chain saws and sandwiches in the morning and return in the evening speckled with sawdust and thinking about our roots. Although our place is mostly forested now, we still call it Jenkins Pasture. It's our half-joking nod to great-great-grandfather Charles Jenkins.

Like Charles himself, the 100 acres he bought in the 1860s was cheap and not terribly productive. This was near the end of New Hampshire's agricultural heyday, and marginal pasture land was plentiful. For most of the previous century, farmers had been cutting and burning the primeval forest to make room for crops. They felled huge pine and oak and chestnut trees with axes, pulled stumps with their oxen, wrestled stones from the ground, furrowed their fields. It was grueling work considering the thin topsoil and short growing season. Mark Twain likely had a 19th-century New Hampshire hill farm in mind when he quipped, "In the south the people shape the land, but in the north the land shapes the people." Parsimony, independence, determination. Most of the famous Yankee traits derive from our relationship with the land.

When the railroad arrived in the

Forest land in Wilmot, New Hampshire.

Photo courtesy Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests



“In the south the people shape the land, but in the north the land shapes the people.”

—Mark Twain



1830s, some subsistence farmers made a few dollars shipping produce to market. But commercial agriculture was not to remain a dominant economic force. Victims of rich soil out west and better wages in the textile mills, farms failed by the thousands in the late 19th century. When the plowing stopped, trees sprouted. Wood industries followed. Subsistence was replaced by commerce as industrious entrepreneurs used the regenerating forests to manufacture a bewildering array of products, including crates, clapboards, pulp, buttons, musical instruments, dowels, boats, furniture, wood flour, tanning solution, and, of course, lumber. Some woods were completely cut over, and others were carefully managed. Acre by acre the forest reclaimed its place as the state's most important raw commercial resource. Granite Staters adjusted accordingly.

Then, at the turn of the 19th century, a very different land ethic appeared: preservation for leisure's sake. Vacationers from New York and Boston found in New Hampshire's White Mountains a wilderness getaway where they could shake off urban woes and commune with nature. Problem was, the mountains also held New England's last virgin forests, and out-of-state timber companies were cutting them hard. The inevitable clash between use and preservation is neatly foreshadowed in two quotes about the White Mountains: "The good of going into the mountains," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "is that life is reconsidered." Timber baron John E. Henry had a different view: "I never see the tree yit that

didn't mean a damn sight more to me going under the saw than it did standing on a mountain."

These conflicting attitudes were reconciled through the Weeks Act of 1911, which led to the creation of the White Mountain National Forest and, ultimately, 50 other eastern national forests. In addition to conserving 12 percent of New Hampshire's land base, the Weeks Act codified the doctrine of multiple use conservation, which seeks to balance resource use and protection.

Throughout this century, New Hampshire has continued to struggle with this balance. We view real estate as wealth and tax it heavily, which discourages long-term stewardship. Yet we so value rural character that nearly half the land in the state is enrolled in a tax-abatement program that keeps it undeveloped. Weak regulations have encouraged haphazard and inappropriate development in many places. Yet 22 percent of the state is permanently protected by land trusts and public agencies, by far the highest proportion of conservation land in the Northeast. We are one of the most fiscally conservative states in the nation. Yet conservation groups are highly respected, and the legislature has invested \$50 million in new parks and forests in the past decade.

Enigmatic? Certainly. But that's New England, and in many ways the Granite State is the region's archetype. We have a rocky seacoast, dramatic mountains, quaint villages, covered bridges, maple sugar shacks, stone walls everywhere. We are also the fastest-growing state in the region. Embracing this prosperity while retaining our distinctive landscapes and culture is not easy. Indeed, it constantly tests our traditionally close relationship with the land and demands a steady dose of Yankee ingenuity. One illuminating fact: forest cover increased steadily from the 1860s through the 1980s, but now it's declining again due to development. How will that affect our



The Andorra Forest, showing the combination of open land and forests typical to New Hampshire.

Photo courtesy Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests

changing relationship with the land?

Jenkins Pasture is a good place to ponder these things. The stone walls especially get me thinking. Built to enclose fields but now a seamless part of the forest, the stone wall is an icon of both continuity and change. And isn't that the essence of land stewardship? To accommodate growth in such a way that our human artifacts fit the landscape as smoothly as a stone wall, a steeple rising over a green hillside, a covered bridge spanning a swift and ever-changing river.

Suggested Reading

- Cronon, William.** 1983. *Changes in the Land*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Dobbs, David, and Richard Ober.** 1995. *The Northern Forest*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green.
- Irland, Lloyd.** 1982. *Wildlands and Woodlots: The Story of New England's Forest*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England.
- Nash, Roderick.** 1982. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 3rd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ober, Richard, ed.** 1992. *At What Cost? Shaping the Land We Call New Hampshire: A Land Use History*. Concord, N.H.: New Hampshire Historical Society.

Richard Ober has written and lectured widely on land use and forest conservation. He is co-author, with David Dobbs, of the award-winning book The Northern Forest (Chelsea Green, 1995). He has edited several books and has been published in Outside, Dartmouth Alumni Magazine, Northern Woodlands, Habitat, and other journals. Ober is senior director for outreach programs for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, the state's oldest and largest conservation organization.