

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jess_tabolt@hotmail.com

Written by: Dave Falkenham, Grafton County UNH Cooperative Extension Forester

My dog walks lately have been at Black Mountain State Forest, a 750-acre state forest that borders the national forest on the shoulder of Black Mountain. Afterwards, I drive to work down Route 116 to the Connecticut River Valley, where the farmland rolls beautifully to the river's edge. The mornings have been humid and cool, often with heavy fog and the red sun rising over the misty hayfields.

Although my walk is primarily on public land, my parking spot and the first part of the walk are on private land. The scenery for my drive to work is also provided by private land owners. In fact, 66% of our forests and farmlands in Grafton County are controlled by private landowners. These private lands blend with our towns and villages and make up the rural character that we so often talk about. If you were to ask any local person why they love living here, they would likely say something about the quiet countryside, the rural character of the towns, or the forests and farms that define the beauty of the landscape.

I think we would all agree that this rural character is worth protecting. If you ever listen to the election speeches of our local politicians, they often talk about supporting economic growth, while still protecting our rural character. But what is rural character?

This is a tough definition but I think I would start by saying that rural character begins with "us" - that is, "we, the people" who have chosen to live this wonderful life in the country. It is important to remember that farmers and forest landowners who pay for the land, pay the taxes, work the land, and keep it undeveloped, form the backbone of the rural character that we all enjoy.

As a UNH Cooperative Extension Forester, I often work with towns to help them tackle the challenges of protecting the landscape that we love so much. Recently I have been working the towns of Bath and Easton to help them write a Natural Resource Inventory. This document is a summary of all the resources in a town that make that town unique; the water, farms, forests, cultural and historical resources that define a town.

The Natural Resource Inventories (NRIs) are simply documentation of a town's rural resources. In the face of high developmental pressure, a town's NRI can be used to justify where a town stands when it comes to its rural character in the face of development.

If an NRI is of interest to your town, or if you are an individual landowner with questions about the land you own and love, don't hesitate to contact me (603-787-6944, dave.falkenham@unh.edu).