

Conservation in an Era of Change  
By Lisa Doner

New England's forests inspired the creation of the National Forest Service, the Appalachian Mountain Club, and a century-old ethos of hiking and outdoor recreation. Access to nature builds a mindset of stewardship, belonging and caring for the lands around us. These forests and waterfalls, vernal pools, beaver meadows and mountain views are ours to enjoy thanks to a network of trails, bridges, roads, picnic and camping areas built by the Civilian Conservation Corps and Army Corps of Engineers in the 1930's-1960's. This infrastructure largely endures today, offering residents and tourists safe and easy egress to New England's deep woods and wilderness. The combination of national and state forests and parks, public and private conservation areas make this region a treasure of natural beauty and a mecca for visitors seeking immersion in the scent of sap and soil, the songs of chickadees and warblers, the compelling music of water and rock.

For 50 years I've been both resident and visitor to these mountainous lands, from the Whites, the Greens, and smaller ranges in between. I've hiked, skied and snowshoed the mountains and logging roads, the icy beaver ponds and derelict hayfields. I gained a sense of stewardship and belonging. I joined conservation commissions and land trusts, and partnered with state and federal agencies and regional recreation groups to bring more land into conservation. I am an outcome of the conservation ethos, one of many thousands, perhaps millions, who feel most alive outside in wild, uncontrolled nature. I use forest trails every day, to exercise my dogs and release my mind from the worries of civilization, the confines of rooms, the burden of social expectation. Isolated from people, but surrounded by life.

Covid and climate change. Irresistible forces of nature. Together they have turned the gaze of urban dwellers towards rural regions, sparking rapid turnover in land ownership from long-time residents who have lifetime kinship with the natural world, to newcomers who see the skin of nature and think it the whole. I see the presence of urban-to-rural emigration in the widening of trails, the curtain of paper and plastic debris extending inland from trailheads, the bike treads in soft stream bottoms. An ethos of stewardship takes time – if they stay, they will eventually learn the difference between city streets with street sweepers that pick up human debris versus rural trails and roads with no paid employees or town-wide garbage collection. This is a transient problem. In the meantime, the building boom is transforming unconserved lands, with 50-80 year old forests clear-cut to provide views, new roads grow across previously intact slopes and hilltops, and urban ideals of recreation bud a resurgence in dirt-bikes, dune-buggies and four-wheelers on trails and logging roads long-undisturbed by motorized wheels.

In New Hampshire, the Holderness and Plymouth conservation commissions are currently partnered in a project that seeks federal funds to buy and conserve over 300 acres of flood plain forest, oxbow ponds and grasslands to create a natural area open for public recreation. Locally known as the Pemi oxbow region, the acreage is rich in wildlife and natural beauty, with bald eagles and kingfisher, wood turtles and spotted salamander, beaver, ducks and woodcock. The entire area is in private ownership, with 5 lots held by two entities, but it is openly used by the public and many assume the open access. Residents traverse it to reach "Secret Beach" a long, sandy shoreline with abundant late afternoon sun exposure, perfect for swimming and lounging on hot summer days. A series of mountain bike trails etched into the floodplain soils create The Gyro, a popular and safe place to learn off-street riding. Hikers, dog walkers, and birders enjoy miles of trail through forest and meadow, with alternating views of the Pemigewasset River and elongated ponds. None of this access, nor conservation of the natural beauty and wildlife habitat, is guaranteed.

As the current real estate boom swells and swallows vast areas of previously undeveloped land, land prices quickly move out of reach of conservation efforts. Funding rules often prohibit conservation organizations from paying higher-than-assessed values for property. Inflation of real estate value greatly

inhibits efforts at land conservation.

Ironically, New England also needs this influx of new, young residents from outside the region. The growth helps rejuvenate local communities, increase tax bases, make monies available for road maintenance, and increases the population of school-aged children. These new residents, I am sure, will eventually develop a respect for natural wonders and sensitivity to their impact on wild surroundings. But the open space they learn to love won't be as large and unfragmented as it was when I first visited 50 years ago, nor when I decided to settle here over a decade ago. It won't be the same as it was pre-Covid. It won't be the same as it is right now. Trash can be picked up. People can learn to carry-in-carry-out and use existing trails. But natural space lost to development of housing, roads, shopping area and golf courses is lost for our lifetime. The wildlife that inhabit those lands will leave or perish. This is the time to seek out land trusts and conservation groups, to take that old family woodlot or farm, that hayfield or sugar maple hillside, and place some sort of conservation status upon it. This is the time to create the future we want for this region.