

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](mailto:jess_tabolt@hotmail.com)

Title: The Roots of Conservation

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This month, much attention is on the agenda of the next President. Those of us who spend a lot of time, most often volunteered, to protect natural areas and minimize harm from human endeavors may feel rather queasy about the future. Talk of reducing the scope and mission of the federal agencies that form the backbone of conservation regulation and funding, like the EPA, NOAA, the USGS and the National Forest and Park Service create lines of worry and stress on the faces of my friends and co-workers. For many, change has rarely seemed so threatening to all we cherish about our lives and livelihood.

Now is a good time, though, to remember the roots of conservation. Federal rules that protect our freshwater, air, land and oceans didn't originate as governmental mandates. These Acts were created in response to years of outcry by volunteer organizations, local communities and individuals: the "grassroots" that gave voice to grief over lands torn open by gullies, rivers on fire and stinking of sludge, unswimmable beaches and fish too poisoned to eat. As a child, the very air burned my eyes and dimmed the sun even hundreds of miles from the nearest city. Signs warned me about the Merrimac River - keep away! About the beaches - don't go barefoot! If the glass and metal don't cut your feet, the tar balls will surely stain them. About the air - caution carbon monoxide and hydrogen sulfide fumes. Warning, danger, hazard! Those are my memories of many, many places from my youth in the 1960's and 70's.

Fifty years later, we've almost forgotten that aura of fear. We fight to protect viewsheds and groundwater rights. We worry about invasive species. Modern signs encourage us to stay on trails to protect the wetlands, that the river's current is the biggest danger, that we need beware of riptides at ocean beaches. The federal rules that enabled this change, giving us air so clean we can smell the scent of snow, water safe for swimming, paddling and fishing, and forests and fields whose soils hold tight in heavy storms, those rules came because of public demand for those things.

We decided that outdoor experiences should be healthy, not hazardous. We decided that clean air and clean water is a right, not a privilege. And we decided that money does not suffice to make our lives entire. Those desires, wishes, decisions cannot be changed by a transition in governance. But it is necessary to make those wishes heard across party lines, across county and state lines. Across this land.

In 1911, the Weeks Act led to creation of the nation's first national forest here in New Hampshire after concerned citizens banded together to form the Society for the Protection of NH Forests and the Appalachian Mountain Club. These groups gave voice to general public desire to protect the land. Today, these and other citizen-led groups like the Audubon Society, Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Federation, and many lake, river and watershed associations, continue to represent public desire for a strong, healthy natural world. I take heart, despite environmental rollbacks forecast at the federal level, knowing my voice resounds through these many grassroots, volunteer organizations.

Photo Caption: President Theodore Roosevelt was a champion of the conservation movement. Most conservation efforts, however, are ***not*** initiated in the Oval Office. Instead they are the result of collaborative, local efforts by normal, everyday citizens. (Photo credit: Britannica.com)