

take measures and choose well over the next fifty years, we'll lose ground that our forests can never reclaim.

There are a number of ways this could go. Unchecked climate destabilization will likely transform New Hampshire's forests over the next century for both good and bad. Mostly bad. A moderate change in our climate will have less severe outcomes. But the time to do something about it is now and that's not happening. If this sounds dire—and it should—it doesn't have to. Federal and state policies supporting local, sustainable logging and whole-tree mills are the best hope for the forest. Land-use laws to avoid over-development can't come as a late-to-the-party reaction to an out-of-control problem. Now is the time.

This isn't purely an aesthetic or tree-hugger's perspective. The state's economic future is closely tied to the forest, its largest crop and land cover. Logging is big here, but tourism is king. Over the past hundred years the North Country has struck a pleasant balance among its forest products, land development, and tourist industries—between beauty and commerce. There's plenty of each and it should stay that way. Our stewardship can't end because the world is changing; we need to anticipate drastic change and pre-empt it. To protect the forest in the future and preserve New Hampshire's culture and character, we must act today.

## The Rediscovery of the North Country REBECCA A. BROWN

ONE HUNDRED years ago our region was at a pivotal moment. Our forebears united across boundaries of geography, politics, and financial interests to win passage of the Weeks Act and create the White Mountain National Forest, guaranteeing that the forest—the economic, ecological, and spiritual foundation of our region—would remain. They had a bold idea and audacious vision.

When historians look back at our region one hundred years from now, what story will they tell? Undoubtedly, it will start with the demise of the industrial wood-based economy that dominated the North Country for generations. The next chapter in the story will be shaped by what we do—or fail to do—today. It is up to us to make this time transformative.

Today, we face the challenge of reinventing our economy and maintaining community vitality in the face of global pressures and trends. What are our bold ideas? Do we have an audacious vision for the next century?

Bold would be to engage in dialogue within communities and across the region, asking ourselves what we value most, what we envision for the future, who we need to be to realize our visions, and what actions we need to take, whether or not the fruition is in our lifetimes. Audacious would be to reinvent our economy through a new relationship with the land—recognizing, as our predecessors did a century ago, that our landscape is our single greatest resource. We might ask ourselves what opportunities would be created, what possibilities would open up, if we revitalize our economy with an ethic that embraces land as part of our community in a relationship of harmony rather than the more conventional approach of consumption and acquisition. By creating a land ethic that embraces our identity with our land and honors the interdependence of land, community, culture, and economy, we will inspire growth and vitality that will draw people here, keep them here, and preserve the character of this region we call home. Our ability to see our region as a “commons,” to evoke that colonial New England concept, will help determine our adaptability, resilience, and nimbleness in the face of change over the years to come.

The North Country landscape is a patchwork quilt of private and publicly-owned forests, farm fields, meadows, rocky peaks, tumbling rivers, village centers, meandering roads, glistening lakes. The form and function of each part links to those around it, creating an interrelated whole. This landscape of diverse yet interdependent parts gives our region its distinct character. And the landscape is more than just physical form. It is also an accumulation



*Land is a touchstone of identity in the North Country*

of culture, tradition, and expression, shaped by our aspirations and reflecting the sensibilities of who we are in relation to the land. In its broadest sense, the landscape is the common thread for all of us who live here, a touchstone of our identity, and a symbol of our interconnectedness. What we choose to do with our land reflects our values as individuals and as communities.

Yet there is little opportunity for regional thinking, and few attempts to encourage it. This may be because it is extremely difficult to wrap our arms around this North Country as a “region.” We rarely even agree on where the region starts. The North Country is geographically large and demographically diverse; we have a heritage of independence, self-reliance, and we have a myth called local control. Traditionally, we view communities and individuals, even features of the land itself, as separate, autonomous little islands. But we now live in a world of accelerating change, a world called “flat” as telecommunications technology has melted distances and created a global

supply-chain for services and products. There are no islands left. As much as we value our independence, our reality is shaped by decisions and events far from our making, be they sinking overseas economies, a Wall Street bust, or the earth hemorrhaging from an exploded oil well in the Gulf of Mexico. How do we ensure the resilience and vitality of our economy and communities and conserve our regional identity within this flat world? We return again and again to our touchstone, our own vision and values that we have articulated and are rooted in our identity with our land.

Our landscape is the single greatest natural resource we possess, and yet we often take it for granted. It is dynamic, changing through the seasons, through the inexorable wear and tear of ice and snow, wind and fire, through the life and death of its innumerable inhabitants, and through the decisions we make about using the land and its resources.

We live in one of the dwindling number of places in our nation known for having a heart and character of its own. In general, our North Country does not—yet—look like everywhere else. Coming up through one of the notches, there is a palpable sense of arriving, of being in a different place from where you left. This is the mystique, the draw, the inspiration for so many. Yet pockets in the region are becoming more like New Jersey with mountains, where the homogenous form of suburban America has taken root. The more that happens, the more we stand to lose—of our heritage, our traditions, and ultimately our collective regional identity.

There are slow, almost imperceptible changes where one decision seems innocuous, inconsequential, but many decisions over time create a new physical and cultural landscape. All of a sudden the place we knew is lost. A view made famous by the White Mountain painters becomes castellated with trophy homes and is gone forever. A field where woodcocks dance and bobolinks sing becomes a lawn. A new gate interrupts a network of local trails. “No hunting” signs hang like autumn leaves. Old barns crumble, the families who worked there long gone. The network of farmers, loggers, and foresters shrinks, the jobs dependent on logging and animals and papermaking die as well. Mills stand empty, and factories quiet. As pink slips multiply, towns lose people who—if they can—go elsewhere to earn a living, where they may feed their families if not their souls.

This is neither a protest of growth nor a plea to resist change. Growth is both inevitable and desirable. But without a vision, and without the tools to guide the future and preserve what we value in our communities, we cannot possibly expect to shape—let alone be satisfied with—the results of growth and change.

There’s nothing better than a land-use controversy to expose tensions between insiders and outsiders, natives and new arrivals, reds and blues, short and long-term thinking. A proposal at this writing captures these differences.

After several years of being unable to sell a historic property at the western entrance to Littleton, the Texas owner wants to level the prominent hilltop to make the site more amenable for a big-box store or mall. He estimates “years of blasting and perhaps 100,000 truckloads of rubble. The site is within a public wellhead protection area, and is surrounded by residents whose wells draw from the aquifer over which the land sits. The effect on groundwater, nearby wetlands, traffic, and local road infrastructure is unknown, for the town has not requested any impact studies. The project has received state and local approval, for all is within the letter of the law. If the project moves forward (some neighbors are challenging it in court), this leveled land will become the symbolic gateway to the White Mountains, just past the sign on I-93 welcoming visitors to New Hampshire.

*Site of proposed mountain-top removal in west Littleton*

It's possible that this mountaintop removal proposal will spark some serious discussion in Littleton about how growth and economic development might be done in environmentally sustainable and compatible ways, that



Littleton might even be a model of such an approach. The proposal is also useful for exposing the serious limitations of how we talk about and plan for our future. Given its prominence on the interstate highway, the proposal has regional and even statewide impact. Yet even within Littleton there is no forum for community discussion about what the project means, how to discern its impact and judge its desirability. Without such inquiry, local control is a myth. Planning boards that simply make sure the i's are dotted and t's are crossed on subdivision plans, or consider only narrow permit requirements, cannot really plan. Yet few boards in our region feel empowered to do anything more. Narrow consideration of land use questions lets decision-makers rely on procedures and avoid the substantive and tough questions about the impact and desirability of major projects. Consequently, communities lurch from here to there with one-off decisions about economic development, job creation, subdivisions, and other land uses. These decisions accumulate into a pattern of some sort—but not one of our careful and conscious choosing.

It's time to reinvigorate local control and really consider how decisions today will create our reality tomorrow. Authentic local control would invite more voices into the discussion and insist on keeping an integrity of place when land-use change is proposed. We could ask, for instance, what do we value about this place as it is? What does this proposal say about this location? What kinds of jobs will it bring? Will it inspire more investment, excitement, and vitality? Does it respect our rural character? Does it contribute to a “whole” community, where the well-being of people, nature, and the economy are all valued? In a reinvented economy based on a new land ethic, we may also reinvent our language around land use. “Local control” might be termed local and regional *leadership*, acknowledging interrelationships within communities and with the outside world, and inviting many voices and points of view. “Planning,” such a loaded term here, might be termed “intention.” Our land ethic would be reflected in our procedures and ordinances as a signal to the world, “this is what is important to us, this is who we are and who we intend to be.”

The ethic of conserving our broad landscape also means recognizing, conserving and supporting the basic values of our communities. “The commons” once evoked commonly owned land, such as the town square or village green. Some of our towns have created community forests, where local public ownership embraces the timber resource for long-term income to the town and ensures that the land stays open for recreation and enjoyment. “The commons” may also evoke shared values about working and being together, with the landscape as a foundation of our common experience. Deeper than a “brand,” there is a message inherent in this view of “the commons” – we welcome you, bring your creativity and your innovations, and respect our heritage. We are a working community. People volunteer. We contribute. We slow

down going through town. We don't crowd tractors off the roads. We don't complain about cutting trees, but educate ourselves in the ways of forests. We live happily next to farms with their seasonal sounds and smells. We pick up after ourselves and close gates on others' property. We don't put up "posted" signs or gate off local trails across our land. We buy local: vegetables, meat, and fruit, wood fuel, banking services, clothing, art. We don't call the police when we hear shots the first day of hunting season. We don't leave security lights burning all night. We learn that in small communities individuals can make a difference, that our actions count. We serve on school boards and select boards and conservation commissions. We tutor adults and deliver meals and aid the dying. We don't just live free or die, we live and let live.

In a world where telecommunications unites people across continents in the blink of an eye, it is unconscionable that significant parts of the North Country are without access to affordable broadband service. Indeed, access is now considered a "civil right" in some circles. As we continue demanding broadband, let's also consider what we do with it. It is probably our best tool for creatively engaging people and cultivating a sense of community across town and geographic boundaries. It can help provide more sources of inquisitive and careful analysis, more voices and expanded opportunities for understanding. The amount of interaction among individuals determines the inventiveness and rate of cultural change within a region, which social scientists call "collective intelligence." Following this reasoning, getting more information into the hands of more people will make decision-making and policy-making at all levels more democratic, more transparent, more intelligent and creative.

Among the important land-use issues we face as a region is ensuring a sustainable wood supply as demand for biomass for energy and heat grows; ensuring that our prime agricultural soils are used for growing food, not sprouting new homes; and recognizing that as the climate changes and population increases, our water supplies are sensitive to heat and drought. There has been little political will to discuss any of these issues regionally. However, cross-regional forums like the Coös Symposium sponsored by the Tillotson Fund are engaging people and organizations on a variety of issues. The North Country Council, the regional planning agency, could offer more leadership in creating broad discussion about vision for the region. But drawing on our fine heritage of self-reliance, it is also up to us plain citizens to find our own ways to catalyze these discussions and bring the political and institutional leadership along with us. Some local environmental and arts organizations are doing just that, reaching outside their own constituencies and inviting broad dialogue on common vision, values, and collaborative opportunities. The philanthropic community would be wise to take note and support these efforts.



*Cooperation and volunteerism help distinguish North Country communities*

New economic development efforts are being created out of the necessity to improvise and reinvent after the closing of the traditional land-based industries. Innovations include district heating and power production using wood, and reusing old mill buildings for commercial-scale indoor growing with aquaculture and hydroponics. Efforts are taking shape around fostering local food production and linking to local and regional markets. Conservation groups are working to conserve farmland and ecologically valuable floodplains along the major rivers, providing financial compensation to farmers and demonstrating the interrelationships among river systems, agriculture, and wildlife habitat. Forestland conservation continues with an eye toward maintaining the wood supply needed for energy production, and the ecological and economic benefits of resisting fragmentation into smaller and smaller parcels. The realization of many of these innovations, experiments, and reinventions will take time, and not all will work. They will require patience and political and financial fortitude to withstand the inevitable setbacks and the long-term horizon for pay off.

In reinventing our economy, we need to generate a sense of optimism and vision that inspires imagination and inquiry – an environment palpable both inside and outside our region. It's a vibrancy, an excitement, verve, a sensibility that is open to and encourages creativity, entrepreneurship, and an appreciation of the land and landscape. This atmosphere is what will attract our own young people back, as well as new investors and residents, from young college graduates to people in their most productive working years. Set the

bar too low on the kinds of businesses we try to bring here, and it will be even harder to attract high paying, creative, skilled jobs in the future. We need to foster an environment that welcomes small business innovators who can locate anywhere, for whom our landscape promises an authentic lifestyle. This will invite people to be part of our reinvention and exercise their own entrepreneurial spirit and creative thinking.

Here in our North Country, if we are wise and have collective vision—if we value our forest resources, our agricultural land, our clean water, if we guide growth to be sensitive to the complexities of our natural systems, respecting the traditions of rural character, property rights, and the public trust in our natural resources—in short if we make it known that our region is where economy, nature, and community are recognized as interrelated and mutually supporting, we will have succeeded in our reinvention. Our region will be rediscovered by people who grew up here and moved away, and it will be discovered by those seeking real communities in which to live and work as well as an unbeatable place to play. Our land will continue to be our touchstone, and our relationship with it, as well as with each other, will be rooted in the common ground of compassion and respect.

## Franconia MAGGIE NORTH

**F**RANCONIA, NEW HAMPSHIRE: a small drinking town with a big skiing problem” reads a t-shirt that dangles from a lone hanger at the Franconia Village store. It is as much a definition of this small town as of the Village Store itself. The store is rustic: wood panels line the walls, a small deli counter resides at the back of the store, and the single checkout line with a wooden counter sits close to the entrance. A bulletin board with news clippings about the community, pictures and notes from the store’s regular customers hangs near the coffee makers. The store, like Franconia, is small and simple but not without character. The Village Store is a classic component of Franconia, but it is the locals passing through that give it that real Franconia charm.

Every morning, Steve Heath welcomes Franconia as he flips the Open/Closed sign on the door. Steve is the store’s owner. He has bushy, gray eyebrows and a permanent smile on his face. As Steve prepares the store for opening, he waits for his customers, who are also his friends. Steve will never just tell you “Thanks” and “Have a good day” once he has rung up your items. Steve will ask you how you are and then how your mother and father are, and how your brother is doing in college, “Is he still playing basketball?” But now, in the early morning, Steve stands behind the counter and waits as Franconia comes to him.

Every weekday morning, a group of men drink Franconia in their coffee. These middle-aged men gather at the Village Store for their daily dose of caffeine and some small town gossip. They are carpenters, they are teachers, they are firefighters, they are local business owners, yet they all converge here. On a cold morning they leave their cars running, turn their collars up, and trudge through the snow and into the store’s warmth. A quick pick-me-up as well as some engaging conversation awaits them inside. The men stand in a circle, drinking their coffee, and talking. They chuckle and chat, and one by one they venture out to their cars again, going their separate ways.

Around midday, Rusty saunters into the store. Rusty carries Franconia in his backpack. Wherever he goes, Franconia comes with him. Rusty is the local of all locals because he embodies the spirit of our small town. One of the many faded hippies who resides in Franconia, Rusty has a long white beard and, on any given day, can be found wandering into the Village Store wearing a plaid button-down over a tie-dyed t-shirt. Everyone, yes everyone, knows who Rusty is. He worked at a local bookstore, and does not own a car. When asked why he doesn’t own a car, he will tell you that he does not want one because he doesn’t need one. He walks wherever he needs to go, and most of the time other Franconians stop to give him a ride. Rusty has become a symbol.