A Turning Point for Connecticut's Wildlands and Woodlands

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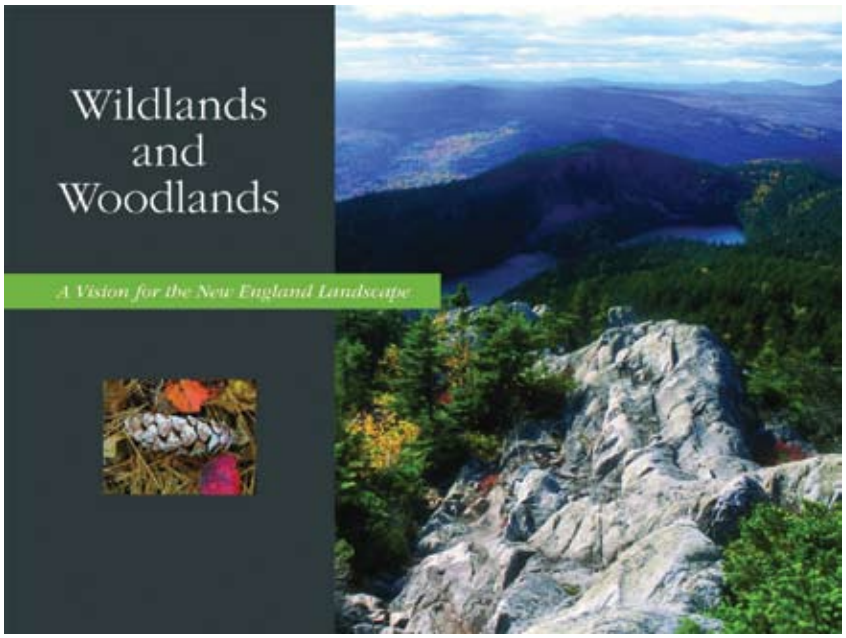
In Connecticut, 1860 was a glorious year for Bobolinks, but a rather gloomy one for trees. Forest cover had reached its lowest point in history; as colonial farming had produced a bucolic landscape nearly two-thirds pasture and cropland, filled with cattle, sheep, and other grazers. Stone walls stretched across grassy hillsides broken by woodlots of resprouting hardwoods and scattered Eastern Hemlocks and pines. Eastern Meadowlarks, Northern Bobwhites, Upland Sandpipers, and Savannah, Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows, along with other open-habitat species, thrived. Wolf, cougar, bear, moose, deer, and beaver had been hunted to local extinction. Similar conditions extended across southern New England. The demand for wood for heat, energy, and diverse needs was so great that Henry Thoreau lamented on a walk in 1855 that "there is hardly a wood-lot of any consequence left but the chopper's axe has been heard in it this season."



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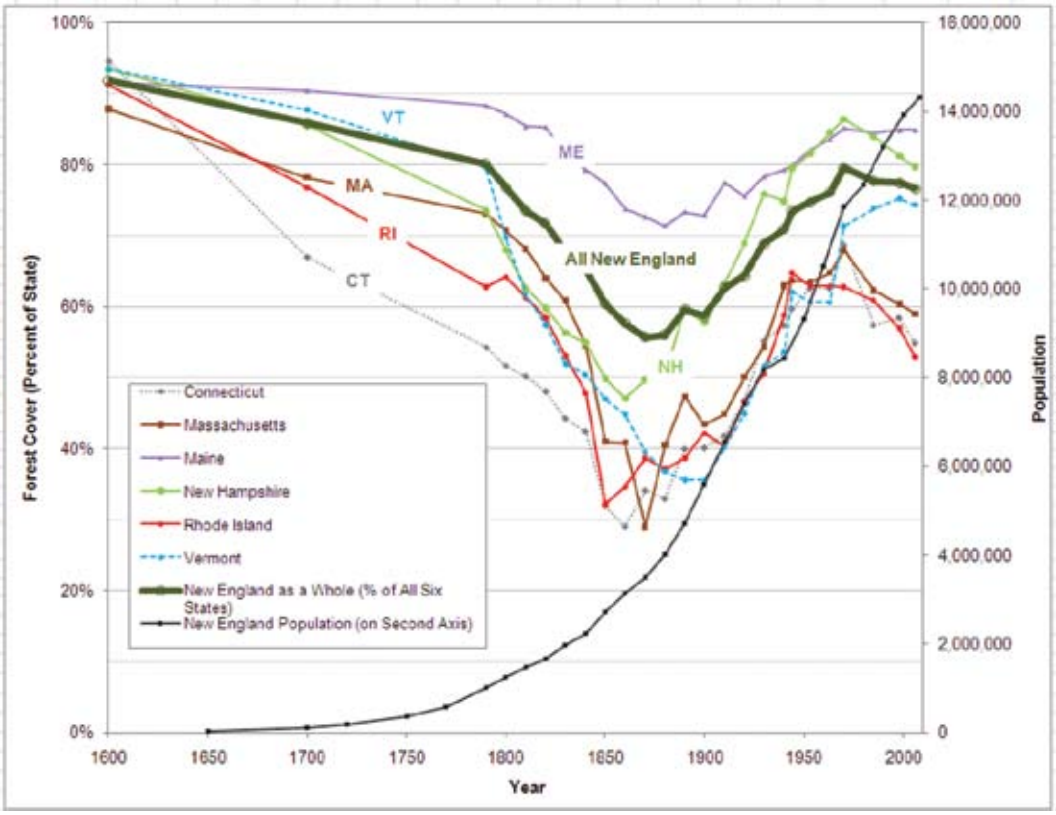
But during the last half of the 19th century, the expansion of the United States as well as our national rail system led much of the region's farmland to be abandoned from active use. New Englanders relocated to work in industrializing cities and towns, on western prairie soils, or in the boom and bust world of gold prospecting. Remaining farmers began importing western grain to feed livestock while concentrating their fields onto the most productive lands. Abandoned fields filled with easily dispersed trees species: White Pine in the north, Red Cedar in the south, and birches, ash, and Red Maple throughout. In the early successional forest (a term coined by Thoreau), shrub specialists like the Eastern Towhee, Golden-winged Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Brown Thrasher flourished. After the first generation of trees was harvested, oaks, hickory, and other heavy seeded, long-lived, and late successional species flourished. The return of larger trees and maturing forests provided tree cavities for Pileated Woodpeckers and Barred Owls, as well as interior forest habitat for Cerulean

TOP PHOTO BY PAUL J. FUSCO

New England Forest Cover and Human Population



(Image by David R. Foster.)

Warblers and Wood Thrushes. This quite unplanned and unchoreographed re-forestation process unfolded through the 20th century and has been heralded by writer Bill McKibben as one of America's great environmental stories.

By 1970, the Connecticut landscape was two-thirds forest, filled with larger and higher-quality trees than had prevailed only fifty years earlier. Serendipity, along with thoughtful land protection and management by conservationists, including state and private foresters, has produced forests that today provide residents with clean and abundant water; a local and renewable source of timber and energy, recreation, and tourism; an attractive and quintessential New England landscape; and critical natural infrastructure for carbon sequestration and other climate benefits. Overall, the return of the forest has been accompanied by a substantial increase in many woodland wildlife species and a corresponding decline in many open-land species. For woodland birds and wildlife, these forests provide irreplaceable habitat, annual migration corridors, and options for regional movement, even as global temperatures rise in the future.

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Retaining these forests and their benefits for future generations, however, will take more than serendipity. Human activity is not working in the forests' favor. Indeed, New England forests are at—or even beyond—a turning point. For the first time in more than a century and a half, sprawling development is outpacing forest expansion. Over the past 35 years, Connecticut forest cover has declined by more than 13 percent, the steepest loss of any state in New England. And unlike historical farm fields, this land development leads to hard surfaces and permanent structure that preclude an easy return of trees.

Responding to this threat, in 2009 the Harvard Forest—Harvard University's 3,500-acre center for research and education in ecology and conservation—convened 20 scientists from across New England to develop a conservation vision for the New England landscape. Wildlands and Woodlands, released in 2010, recommends permanently retaining 70% (30 million acres) of New England in forest while also preserving the remaining farmland. This vision is motivated by the fact that history has provided us with a second, fleeting chance to determine the fate of our forests. When settlers first confronted the vast forest landscape, they viewed it as a limitless resource and a hindrance to progress and so they cut and cleared it. Today, our choice is ominously different. Will we defend our forests, healthy watersheds, and working farms, or will we allow roads, parking lots, and structure to spread unchecked across the land?

Action Steps

What will protecting the New England landscape, and achieving the Wildlands and Woodlands vision, require? Doubling the pace of land conservation through changes in land policy and the voluntary establishment of conservation easements on private lands, for starters. Today, only about 18 percent of New England's 42 million acres are permanently protected from development, varying from 17 percent in Connecticut to 29 percent in New Hampshire. As was the case a century ago, the majority of New England's forests are privately owned. Achieving an ecologically sound, economically productive scale of forest conservation will depend on the long view of private landowners.

PHOTO BY PAUL J. FUSCO

White-tailed Deer have increased with reforestation and now overbrowsing is a threat.

Private woodlands are at high risk for sale, parcelization into smaller lots, and development. Recent projections by the U.S. Forest Service suggest that with current development trends, up to 63 percent of private forest land could be lost to development in substantial regions of New England by 2030. When landowners place permanent conservation restrictions on their land, they not only contribute to the long-term preservation of New England, they also reap a number of personal benefits.

Protecting land ensures that the many benefits of forests and farmland are retained for future generations. Local wood products and a robust recreation infrastructure are key, sustainable elements of the New England economy. The Wildlands and Woodlands vision recommends that 90 percent of protected forests be variously managed for timber, recreation, and other values. The vision also advises that working farms be expanded. And the recommended level of forest protection allows for up to a doubling of well-planned development over the next 50 years.

Advancing Forest Conservation in Connecticut

Over the last decade, many great victories for land conservation have occurred when land trusts, public agencies, private companies and conservation organizations have collaborated to protect large landscapes comprised of many parcels. With this approach, individuals and organizations pool resources, funds, and ideas to advance big conservation and management goals including water quality improvement, wildlife preservation, enhanced recreation, and sustainable timber harvest. A strong case in point is the Centennial Watershed State Forest, Connecticut's largest conservation project, involving the protection of more than 15,000 acres.

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Many of the new conservation collaborations are bolstered by the work of the Wildlands and Woodlands Partnership, a growing, informal network of

more than 60 organizations that share information and coordinate conservation activities. The Partnership is comprised of groups from across New England, but it is coordinated by Highstead, a non-profit research and conservation organization in Redding, Connecticut.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Connecticut is home to several strong, collaborative models for landscape-scale conservation. One such model is the Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative. A member of the Wildlands and Woodlands Partnership and co-sponsored by the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA), the Trust for Public Land (TPL), and 22 area land trusts, the Greenprint works to identify and protect open space in the 28 towns of the Litchfield Hills. Recent successes include protecting 400 forested acres along the Housatonic River, nearly 900 acres in Kent and Sharon, and 2.5 miles of riverfront agricultural land in Salisbury. In addition to the work of the Greenprint's sponsoring organizations, these successes have relied on efforts from many private landowners, town municipalities, as well as the CT Department of Environmental Protection and the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts.

COURTESY of HARVARD FOREST

A common 19th century farm scene.

COURTESY of HARVARD FOREST

The same scene nearly 100 years later after farm abandonment.

Gaining Ground

As climate change, invasive species, and other long-term environmental challenges loom over our region, our best security is the preservation of our existing natural infrastructure. The aim of the Wildlands and Woodlands vision—to permanently protect 70% of New England as forest over the next 50 years—is bold but essential, daunting but achievable. Doubling the pace of land conservation in our region will make New England a national leader in 21st-century conservation, while also preserving the treasured landscapes that we and our native wildlife rely upon, now and into the long-standing future.