

THE NORTHERN FOREST FORUM (1992-2002)

Working for Sustainable Natural and Human Communities

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The Northern Forest Forum was published bi-monthly for a decade on a shoestring budget by grassroots activists, most of whom lived in or near timber-dependent communities in the 26 million-acre Acadian Forest region of northern Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the Adirondack and Tug Hill regions of New York.

The major paper companies controlled 10 million acres of the region for most of the twentieth century. In 1988 the sale of nearly a million acres of Diamond International's timber lands shocked the region's conservation, timber, and political leaders. Fearful that developers would divide up and remove these lands from the timber base, they established the Northern Forest Lands Study to examine the crisis and offer a menu of possible public policy options.

The 1990 [Northern Forest Lands Study](#)² acknowledged that the status quo could not be sustained, and it recommended the establishment of a Northern Forest Lands Council (NFLC) to guide the region through a tumultuous transition period. The large timber landowners in Maine, which comprised 60 percent of the region, asserted control over the Council's agenda with the intention that it sunset after four years (September 1994).

As a consequence of industry's control, the Council's operating assumptions were:

- The large landowners had served the region and its forests and communities well
- The major threat to the forests came from developers, not from forest management
- Tax breaks and subsidies to large landowners would thwart the sales and save the industry
- Large conservation easements, not public acquisition, was the most cost-effective way to prevent development and conserve the landscape

Because the Council had ceded control over its agenda to industry, it chose not to examine the ecological, economic, and cultural impacts of the massive clearcuts, herbicide applications, and other intensive forestry practices. It ignored the emerging crisis in the region's paper industry and the consequences for local communities. It refused to consider Wilderness designations and federal land purchases, including potential national parks. It refused to heed the warnings of conservation biologists that the region needed to establish a robust network of ecological reserves designed to protect ecosystem integrity and biodiversity.

Early in 1992, I urged the Northern Forest Alliance, the 15-member coalition of regional conservation groups engaged in ongoing debates with the Northern Forest Lands Council, to establish a periodical to focus on its progressive conservation agenda and to counter the pro-

¹ This background is explored more thoroughly in *Children of the Northern Forest*, Sayen's first-hand account of the recent human and environmental history of the northern forest lands.

² [Highlighting](#) indicates hyperlink

timber industry agenda of the Council. I argued for giving voice to those who were left out of the Council's discussions and considerations, especially:

- The forests and native species, including the extirpated wolf, cougar, and Atlantic salmon
- Local communities dependent on the timber industry
- Conservation biologists and all people concerned with ecosystem integrity
- Wilderness defenders and public lands proponents
- Proponents of alternative management, especially **Low Impact Forestry**
- Advocates of niche, value-added manufactured goods, instead of commodities
- All committed to a healthy democracy

The Alliance expressed some interest, but took no action. I grew impatient, and after one Alliance meeting that spring, Dan Plumley of the Adirondack Council bought me a beer and urged me to go it alone.

I took his advice, named the new publication the *Northern Forest Forum*, and, after discussions with [Dave Brower](#), the legendary Archdruid who supplied seed money for the venture, adopted for its motto: *Working for sustainable natural and human communities*.

The *Forum* rejected the conventional wisdom that wilderness and ecologically informed forest management are jobs- and economy-killing catastrophes. We asserted that land health and frugal prosperity are *not* a zero-sum game. As the first issue went to press early in September 1992, Gulf of Maine poet Gary Lawless, expressed our aspirations:

"I hope that it will be a forum of voices for the bioregions through which the northern forests move. I hope that we can try to speak for the great diversity of life within these regions.... that we will hear the local cultures, the local wisdom, the deep sense of place and connectedness expressed through many forms of language, from the scientific article to poetry, from interviews to artwork, all of it being part of the deep song of place."³

Along with articles about conservation biology and issues the Council was ignoring, I could not resist inserting some irreverent quizzes. The "Land Acquisition Quiz" asked what percentage of the then-current Savings and Loan scandal bailout would be necessary to acquire ten million acres of Northern Forest Lands. Answer: "0.5 percent. Yes, the cost... would be less than one half of one percent of the current estimate of the cost of the S&L bailout—\$500 billion!Maybe land acquisition is a steal (certainly the S&L debacle was)."

Other quizzes asked:

- "Who Got the Tax Breaks?" Answer: Fortune 500 Paper Companies who had persuaded the NFLC that high property taxes and loss of favorable treatment for capital gains after the 1986 federal tax reform were the cause of recent large land sales, and were clamoring for additional tax breaks that would, once again, have to be paid for by the long-suffering public.
- "Who paid the biggest pollution fine?" Hint: a paper company.

³ Gary Lawless, Letter to The Northern Forest Forum, *Northern Forest Forum* 1, no. 1 (Autumn Equinox 1992): 3.

- A “Local Control Quiz” challenged readers to locate the corporate headquarters of each of the paper companies that owned large tracts of land in the Northern Forests. Answer: Toronto, Darien and Stamford, Connecticut, Atlanta, Boise, Purchase, New York, Philadelphia, and Richmond.

In the initial *Forum Interview*, I had asked David Brower if we should “make a list of places we want to protect?” He demurred: “We don’t want a list of places to save; we’ve got to come up with a short list of places we are willing to trash.” The *Forum* requested readers to submit candidate areas worthy of trashing, along with the reason they were selected. “The winner will receive a handwritten letter critiquing her/his choice(s) from David Brower.” Happily, there were no submissions. I concluded that discerning *Forum* readers believed all places on earth should be treated with respect and kindness.

I invited the Alliance to take over the *Forum*, with the stipulation that I would like to be part of the editorial team. The Alliance leadership never responded. While a disappointment, it freed me to produce a paper that did not shy away from controversy or seek a consensus among its members. I published the *Forum* under the aegis of a small grassroots group I coordinated: **The Northern Appalachian Restoration Project**. Many Alliance members contributed articles to the *Forum* over the years.

I had some experience in self-published periodicals, but my limited computer skills led to innumerable pratfalls. Lacking a laser printer, the text for the first three issues were brought forth on friends’ printers in Vermont, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Finally, I acquired a computer, laser printer, and a large screen so I could design a tabloid page. Kit Kuntze, a gifted book designer, taught me to use Quark to design the *Forum*. He patiently answered my non-stop questions, no matter how trivial or dim-witted. I loved the design and layout process. However, my design skills, to be charitable, were rudimentary and not especially imaginative. After a few issues, Kit laughed and said something to the effect that each new issue of the *Forum* I managed produce something new and dreadful. I couldn’t argue.

For an early issue, I had nearly finished making corrections around midnight. I had to leave early the following morning to drop off the galleys at the *Coos County Democrat* where the issue would be printed, and then head to Logan Airport. I accidentally hit the delete button, lost all the corrections, and was forced to reconstruct as many as my exhausted mind could recall. I still had five or six undesigned pages that I slapped together at the *Democrat*’s office the next morning. On another occasion, I deleted our entire mailing list instead of hitting the print button. A kind friend retrieved most of subscribers’ names and addresses.

I enjoyed playing a variety of roles: publisher, editor, contributor, chaser after strong articles, photos, and artwork, and attaching mailing labels, with the patient assistance of Kit, Mary Stinehour, Andrew Whittaker, my wife Rachel, and Fife Hubbard, a talented intern who did so much for the project in its early days.

The *Forum* was blessed with a wonderful ensemble of activist-reporters. Shortly after the first issue appeared, Andrew Whittaker, whose father Bren served as Vermont’s conservation

representative on the NFLC, contributed the first in a series of intriguing articles on ecological economics. Soon, he was assistant editor, and beginning with the Summer Solstice 1997 issue (vol. 5, #5), Andrew became the editor. Mitch Lansky was prolific—and persnickety. Long after the ink had dried on the press run, he would call me with another tiny edit for paragraph 22. Jym St. Pierre contributed major features on a variety of Maine forest issues, and for many years, assembled a valuable news roundup: “Maine Woods Watch.” Jym also turned delivery of his articles at the absolute last minute into an artform. A diverse array of other citizen activists contributed substantial writing, including Pamela Prodan, Daisy Goodman, Barbara Alexander, Ron Huber, Bill Butler, Michael Kellett, David Carle, and many others.

After the first issue appeared, I met *Maine Times* artist Jon Luoma who offered to contribute his artwork to the *Forum*. Most of the 52 issues produced during the *Forum*’s ten-year run were graced by Jon’s inspired, sometimes snarky, artwork. He, like Jym, loved to torture me as deadlines approached. My wife Rachel and Mitch’s wife, Sue Szwed, regularly contributed artwork, while John McKeith, Steve Gorman, Alex MacLean and many others supplied photographs that kept the pages of the *Forum* lively, engaging funny, and beautiful—or ugly, in the case of photos of clearcuts.

I especially enjoyed conducting *Forum* interviews with conservationists, thoughtful leaders of the timber industry, forest ecologists, and a northern Maine logger who organized a blockade of the Canadian border to protest the large landowners’ treatment of loggers, truckers, and the industrial forest. I interviewed Hank Swan, a member of the Governors’ Task Force to the Northern Forest Lands Study and president of the timber investment firm Wagner Woodlands in the summer of 1993. Several forest activists cancelled their *Forum* subscriptions to protest my sin of giving space to the enemy. The next issue, I interviewed Roger Milliken who managed his family’s 100,000-acre Baskahegan timberlands. I felt it was important to hold civil conversations with our more open-minded adversaries, and I believe those interviews are still instructive.

The *Forum* covered Council subcommittee meetings and critiqued its studies and reports. While the Council sought to limit damage from open discussion of controversial public issues, the *Forum* encouraged analysis, dialogue, and debate. Citizens, customarily silenced by the insider “seat at the table” etiquette, contributed their voices to the *Forum*’s growing community conversation.

The Council scheduled a series of twenty listening sessions for public comment on the *Draft Recommendations* from late March to early May 1994 throughout the four-state region, along with stops in Boston, New Haven, and New York City. We attended each of these and produced three issues of the *Forum* in two months that provided in-depth critiques of every aspect of the flawed *Draft*. We passed copies out to citizens who attended the listening sessions.

Three-quarters of the 741 people who testified at these listening sessions urged the Council to strengthen the conservation provisions in its final report. Less than nine percent opposed stronger

conservation measures. Nearly half of the 178 citizens who testified at Maine sessions criticized the Council for ignoring destructive forest practices.⁴

The 600 written comments submitted to the Council were even more critical of its recommendations and omissions. Many urged the Council to take specific action to:

- Stop industrial clearcuts
- Support public purchase of land to create wilderness, national parks and ecological reserves
- Rebuild a local economy that sustains rather than degrades forests and is immune to the whims of absentee owners and resilient to global economic forces.

Robert Matthews from Houlton, Maine, offered a logger's perspective:

*I have been a professional logger for the past twenty years. In this relatively short span of time, about one-fifth of a stand's rotation, I have been witness to a devastating transformation. Without regard for future cost, we have condoned the exploitation of not only the forests but also of the communities dependent on these forests.... I am privileged to witness, almost daily, the intricacies of a diverse system that revolves around this mass of trees we call a forest. I have also witnessed industry's complacency towards these same intricacies.*⁵

How did the NFLC react to public feedback?

"The Council was heartened that so many commenters agreed with [our] approach..." it wrote in its final report, *Finding Common Ground*. It lectured taxpayers who did not reside in the Northern Forest, but would foot the bill for subsidies to large landowners: "Those living outside and perhaps unfamiliar with the way of life here must understand that it is entirely possible to conserve the forest and sustain towns and villages within its boundaries in ways that neither damage its human nor its plant and animal communities."⁶

Public comments strongly supported establishing an on-going regional Northern Forest Lands Council. Mortified by the public outpouring of support for wilderness, biodiversity, and regulation of destructive forest practices, coupled with opposition to further tax cuts for timber liquidators, the timber lobby killed the emerging regional dialogue after September 1994.

The large land sales kept coming after the Council disbanded, and all paper company lands had been sold off by 2004 except for 1.5 million acres owned by New Brunswick-based Irving. The absentee investment groups that currently own the land have even less regard for the forests and communities than their predecessors.

⁴ "Council Listening Sessions Demonstrate Broad Support for Strengthening Conservation Measures," *Northern Forest Forum* 2, no. 6 (Mid Summer 1994): 2, 3, 13. Fife Hubbard, "Public Demands Land Acquisition, Ecological Reserves, and Good Forestry," *Northern Forest Forum* 2, no. 5 (Letter Writers Guide Special Issue (April 1994)): 26.

⁵ Letter to NFLC: Robert Matthews, Houlton, ME, May 8, 1994.

⁶ Northern Forest Lands Council, *Finding Common Ground: The Recommendations of the Northern Forest Lands Council*, (Concord, NH: September 1994), 9, 18.

Nearly all public conservation funds went into mega-conservation easements on mostly remote timberlands with scant potential for development, while intensive harvesting continued across the region. There was very little public acquisition of land.

All efforts to regulate destructive forest practices were thwarted or diverted into weak practices like green certification. Discussions of ecological reserves were either abandoned or led to trivial accomplishments such as a state cap of 75,000 acres of reserves in Maine.

Global economic forces coupled with a strategic lack of investment in modernization of New England operations led to the closure of many of the region's paper mills, leaving the economies of timber-dependent communities in shambles. Depopulation, an aging demographic, unemployment and economic decline has led to the closure of schools and discontinuance of entire towns.

Meanwhile, threats to forest health posed by relentless intensive logging are being exacerbated by climate change.

A [recent study from the University of New Hampshire](#) concluded that more than half of the forest land in northern New England (Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine) is in a degraded condition.⁷ A [study from Harvard University](#) warns that, if current management practices persist over the next half century, these industrial forests of Maine will be responsible for 68 percent of all of the greenhouse gases emitted from managed forests in New England.⁸ Rather than drawing support from nature, the treatment of the northern forest continues to be detrimental to human, environmental and global health.

Lacking a regional dialogue, northern New England forest conservation in the past quarter century has largely ignored the same issues the Council evaded and the *Northern Forest Forum* brought front and center.

There remains an urgent need for a strong voice and bold action in northern New England that is *working for sustainable natural and human communities*.

⁷ John S. Gunn, Mark J. Ducey, and Ethan Belair, "Evaluating degradation in a North American Temperate Forest," *Forest Ecology and Management*, 432 (2019): 421-423.

⁸ Matthew J. Duveneck and Jonathan R. Thompson, "[Social and Biophysical determinants of future forest conditions in New England: Effects of a modern land use regime](#)," *Global Environmental Change*, 55(2019) 115-129.