

the meaning of place

How New Hampshire's North Country landscape shapes the ecological identity of the region's residents

By Laura Alexander

What is the nature of people's relationship with the land? Is the land the focus of attachment to place, or just a backdrop for social life? A recent study set in Coös County explored these questions as a way to understand how the well-being of North Country residents might be affected in the wake of the changes that are taking place in land use and the region's economic base. Conceiving of the physical setting in this way expands our understanding of the relationship between people and place and can help guide land management policies, particularly in communities where traditional ways of interacting with the land are undergoing dramatic change.



In-depth interviews with long-term Coös County residents revealed five themes of meaning that the land, or physical setting, holds for its inhabitants. Land provides stability; it is restorative; it provides sustenance; it is where people experience spirituality; and it fosters the development and expression of ecological identity. These themes are tied to residents' ability to access land freely, and that has implications for the conservation community.

The More Things Change...

The physical landscape represents stability: it makes people feel secure and at home. Though social relationships and jobs come and go, the physical environment is one thing people can count on to endure in their lives.

"I've looked at those mountains almost every day of my life," said Berlin logger Mike Kelley. "As we get older and so many things change, it's nice to have certain things you can still relate to that are the same." But is it really the same?

The Brown Paper Company in Berlin defined the economic well being of the city and its residents for much of the last 120 years. Now in its demise, the landscape re-emerges, as seen in these two photographs of the Androscoggin River in Berlin (above).

Top: This photograph, from the Brown Company archives circa 1960s, shows the paper company in its heyday, an industrial site along the river with mills. Photo from the Brown Company Collection, Michael J. Spinelli, Jr. Center for University Archives and Special Collections, Herbert H. Lamson Library and Learning Commons, Plymouth State University.

Inset: The paper company in Berlin defined the economic well-being of the city and its residents for much of the last 120 years. Now in its demise, the landscape re-emerges, as seen in this recent photo. Photo by Laura Alexander.



Mike Kelly

"I've looked at those mountains almost every day of my life. As we get older and so many things change, it's nice to have certain things that are the same."

Photo by Ellen Edersheim.



Lindsay Gray

"If you go in the woods, you can see where it was logged X number of years ago, and you can see how fast it's grown and at that rate what it's going to be in 10 years."

Photo by Ellen Edersheim.



Bill Schomburg

"The land sustains you. It filters, it makes pure again, it revitalizes."

Photo by Ellen Edersheim.



Marion Shafer

"We heat with wood exclusively. I love the woodshed for what it is—a symbol of my stubborn independence."

Photo by Ellen Edersheim.

How can a place with a history of timber harvesting be perceived by locals as unchanging? The key is that residents perceive natural landscape changes, such as ice storms and wind damage, and man-made changes in the form of timber harvesting as temporary. This recognition reveals a great deal about how they interact with nature. For North Country residents, the landscape doesn't just whizz by the pickup truck windows. Rather, these individuals spend time on the land paying attention to its details—to which species are growing and at what rates, and to what has changed since they were there last.

This interaction forms their ecological identity and land ethic: a deep sense of belonging to and intimate knowledge of the natural world that guides their actions.

"If you go in the woods, you can see where it was logged X number of years ago," said Pittsburg resident Lindsey Gray. "You can see how fast it's grown, and at that rate what it's going to be tomorrow or in 10 years, and when the cycle is going to start over."

Refreshed and Restored

Spending time in the woods or otherwise interacting with the physical environment is how North Country residents recover from the stresses of everyday life. In these natural settings, they suspend the notion of time. They feel as though they have the freedom to think about whatever they want for as long as they want. It is how they escape, where they find solitude, and where they play—walking, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and driving on woods roads. This makes the setting restorative, refocusing their priorities, refreshing their outlook, and renewing their ability to cope with life's challenges. The opportunity to escape into the

natural setting is not an afterthought, but something recognized as a need.

"It sustains you," said retired Colebrook Academy teacher Bill Schomburg. "It filters, it makes pure again, it revitalizes. It's as necessary as fruit or cereal, and if it's neglected, something could die."

Conceiving of the natural environment as restorative expands our understanding of what the physical setting means to people. Place attachment is formed over time through accretion of experience. People's feelings and emotions connected to place are comprised of three intertwined dimensions: the physical setting itself; the activities and experiences that people have in a given location; and the meanings derived from experiences and memories in a given place.

Sustenance

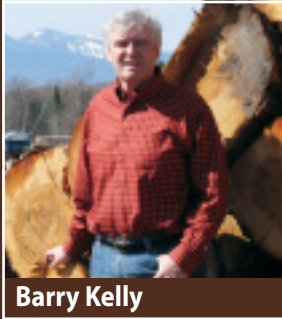
Another vital—and tangible—role that the land plays for North Country residents is sustenance. There they earn a living, secure fuel for heat, and obtain food. Many residents derive their income directly or indirectly from timber harvesting, farming, and tourism related to the region's natural setting. As one drives through the area, the familiar odor of wood smoke is easily recognized, and stacks of cordwood are as common as pickup trucks parked in driveways.

Dalton resident Marion Schafer connects her woodshed with feeling secure and independent. "We heat with wood exclusively," she said. "It makes me feel secure when the woodshed is full. I love the woodshed for what it is: a symbol of my stubborn independence."

And while the rest of the state has only recently discovered the pleasures of returning to eating locally, North Country residents

For North Country residents, “protected” has come to mean “accessible.” Decades of timber harvesting have left vast tracts of land in the North Country undeveloped and accessible via logging roads, such as the road pictured here. For years, the land has been used for hunting, walking, and snowmobiling. This experience of open access has led to the perception that these “public” lands are “protected” and will always be open to these uses. More recently, area residents feel this changing as development, mostly in the form of second homes and recreational camps, has limited access to some places, and conservation has restricted motorized access to others. Photo by Jack Savage.





Barry Kelly

"You get out there and look at something, and you actually feel a part of it. You feel you belong here, you lose yourself."

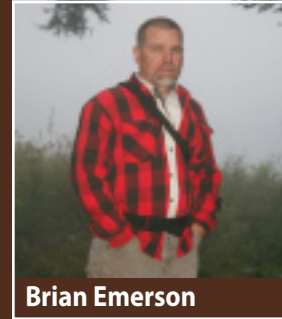
Photo by Ellen Edersheim.



John Harrigan

"Looking your dinner in the eye" is a time-honored practice in the North Country, along with harvesting gardens and putting up produce.

Photo by Jack Savage.



Brian Emerson

"I like the fact that you can just go wherever you feel like going... If you want to go out for a walk in the woods, every inch of the ground isn't posted."

Photo by Iris Emerson.

never stopped that practice. Almost all research participants talked about harvesting gardens, putting up produce, and raising their own meat—or as Colebrook resident John Harrigan said, “Looking your dinner in the eye.”

Where God Lives

Finally, the physical setting is where North Country residents experience spirituality. Typically the trigger for this experience is stunning scenery, such as a beautiful sunset, or encounters with wildlife, like seeing a moose. In either case, the experience inspires a sense of reverence and the feeling of being part of something larger than humankind. Some people talked about feeling the presence of God in nature; others said that nature is their church.

Sawmill owner Barry Kelley of Berlin describes it this way: “You get out there and you look at something, and you don't just look at it, but you actually feel a part of it. You feel you belong here, you lose yourself.”

It's All about Access

Attachment to the land in the North Country is strong, and the many ways residents interact with the land strengthens their attachment through accretion of experience. The underpinning for that attachment to land is access to it. This enables residents to repeat the experiences that have formed and deepened their attachment. And that is where some paradoxical findings were revealed in the research.

Not surprisingly, the conversion of land from forested or open to some other use greatly diminished people's attachment to it, no

matter how strong that attachment. Access to land is usually lost when land is developed. Traditionally, open access coupled with the history of timber harvesting has meant that vast tracts of land in the North Country have always been undeveloped and accessible via logging roads.

Groveton business owner Brian Emerson expressed his appreciation for the tradition. “I like the fact that you can just go wherever you feel like going for the most part,” he said. “If you want to go out for a walk in the woods, every inch of the ground isn't posted. There's lots of wilderness, lots of back roads, and you can get away from everything when you want to.”

The first-hand experience of open access in the North Country has led to the perception that these lands will always be open to hunting, walking, driving on logging roads, and snowmobiling. North Country residents have experienced their use of this land as “protected,” perhaps stemming from the idea that accessible land is public [protected] land.

In the past decade, residents have felt this changing as development, mostly in the form of second homes and recreational camps, has restricted access to some places, and conservation has limited motorized access to others.

Implications for Land Conservation

One way that residents could protect certain lands from development would be to identify them as conservation targets. Interestingly, several study participants expressed a preference that no additional land be put into conservation status in the North Country. This seems contradictory because two traditional land uses that are central to

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North Country residents—timber management and agriculture—would most likely continue on protected lands.

Land conservation, however, has failed North Country residents in their opinion. This is in large part because although timber management is allowed on public lands as policy, in practice it has often been thwarted by outside groups. An example is the White Mountain National Forest. Years of deliberation went into developing a Forest Management Plan that includes timber harvesting, but attempts to implement the plan have been stalled by groups like the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society. Many residents see this as interfering in sound forest management and as threatening to their livelihood. Some stated that by restricting timber harvesting in some areas results in harder cutting on the rest of the forest to meet the demand for wood.

The final straw is the perception that under conservation, access is cut off—particularly wheeled access to remote locations where residents were formerly allowed. This region is one of the last remaining areas where open access has been the norm. Land is considered “open” unless posted, and because of all the logging in the region, roads have been constructed and maintained throughout these undeveloped lands for the purpose of getting timber out. The former paper company lands have traditionally been open to wheeled access, whereas conserved lands are usually accessible by foot-travel only.

A Judgement-Free Zone

The physical environment offers a judgment-free reflection of the North Country resident's land ethic—an ethic individually determined based upon iterative experience with the land.

For generations, people in the North Country have been the recipients of judgment, advice, and opinion with regard to the way they act on the land. Most of this has been about the amount, location, and method of harvesting timber. Voices from *down below* have often accused timber operators of cutting hard and in ecologically damaging ways. While there are residents who will readily acknowledge over-zealous timber harvests, there are also those who would justify their actions: their experience harvesting and watching the forest re-grow tells them that their land ethic is a more accurate representation than the feedback they receive from others.

As the North Country struggles to define itself in the wake of change to its economic base and the accompanying land use impacts, it will become increasingly important for residents to consider strategies for preserving the lands that are most meaningful to them. The conservation community—and all of us from *down below*—may be able to assist in this effort by helping people see how preserving land can protect the vital relationship between people and land. ¶

A New Hampshire native, Laura Alexander is an assistant professor of environmental studies at Colby-Sawyer College in New London, NH. She recently received her doctoral degree from Antioch University. This feature summarizes the highlights of her doctoral dissertation.

The full text of Laura Alexander's study can be viewed at
www.ohiolink.edu/etd/view.cgi?acc_num=antioch1219972881

