

Cultivating the Identity and Values of Northern Vermont

**A SENIOR CAPSTONE PROJECT
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**By
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Abstract

Vermont is a state defined both by its sprawling, natural landscapes, and its year-round tourist economy and increasing presence of second homeowners. More and more people are traveling to Vermont with the hopes of forming strong connections to the greater area. The idea of "Sense of Place", or one's individual connection to a particular place, is strong in Vermont. This study delves into individuals' definitions of sense of place in Vermont, in order to look at the conservation of land and the preservation of culture in a place where the natural landscape serves as a core component of identity. Are individuals' connections with northern Vermont enough to protect the region from human-related land degradation? Is a healthy balance between maintaining the old, while introducing parts of the new, attainable? Through conversations with conservationists, foresters, historical preservationists, and others, I unearth what currently constitutes Vermont's culture and image. It is clear that as increases in development continue to haunt Vermont and its landscapes, sense of place serves as a powerful force strong enough to protect what matters most in Vermont.

The Colorado College Honor Code

On my honor, I have neither given, nor received, any unauthorized aid on this

honors thesis. Honor Code upheld. *Stephanie Brownell*

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Preface

As I sat in Chris Boget's office at the Lake Champlain Land Trust in Burlington, Vermont, I opened my notebook, glanced at my list of interview questions, and asked him to define sense of place. Chris smiled at me briefly before gazing out his window to admire nearby Lake Champlain, an area he has worked years to protect. He began a long story of how his sense of place developed and easily described his connection with the shores of Champlain. I could relate, but I knew that our definitions greatly differed, despite "our places" being less than forty miles apart. After finishing his thought, Chris looked at me, and asked, "Well, what's *your* sense of place?" I hesitated for a moment, and then dove into my story. I was surprised by how easily the answer came. It was as if I had been practicing my response subconsciously for years. But, I guess in a way I have, and so has Chris.

My high school (a boarding school in New Hampshire) required every junior to write a "Place Paper" over the course of the spring semester. I easily chose my place: the top of the Quad chairlift on Mount Mansfield in Stowe. At seventeen I didn't yet know how to define this connection, but easily wrote fifteen pages about "my place":

Mt. Mansfield has always been my home, familiar and strong. I have skied every trail, hiked most of the trails, and have even spent a few sunny days at the highest point in Vermont (on top of the Nose.) This particular place is special because to me, it is the only place that represents home. Whenever I am coming or going I can always see my home getting closer or farther away. If I am leaving, I know that I will be back soon. Flying into Burlington, I look out the plane window and see my home.

Riding up the tram at Cannon on a rare clear day, I can see my home. Whenever I am sitting on my Dad's boat on Lake Champlain, I look up and see my home. I always know where I am because my home is not just a small yellow house with a pond; it is a mountain that reminds me of my place.

- Excerpt From My Place Paper (2010)

Introduction

*Surrounded by hills on every side,
The leaves have changed and long ago died.
The town watches as the mountain becomes white,
At this point in the year, the air has a bite.
With the cold, the community does not fade,
Instead they meet in the Nosedive glades.
So what is it that makes this place so unique?
Partially it's that most care about every single peak.
Conservation helps to keep this place green,
With areas protected, the land stays clean.
But with this protection also comes recreation,
That's what makes this place rare in our nation.*

- A Reflection on Sense of Place by Josie Brownell

I am a native Vermonter. Having the ability to state that is a point of pride for many. People easily form connections with specific areas or places throughout Vermont, so if one has spent considerable time in the state, it is almost as if they have won a prize. As I rode in a cab to the airport at 4 am to fly back to Colorado last January, I casually asked the driver, "So, how long have you been in Vermont?" I thought it was an innocent question. I was just trying to make small talk. But, he quickly became defensive and answered that his mother was born in Vermont, so he was basically a native, accusing me of starting the age old competition of who's been here longer? I briefly smiled, mentally smacking myself for not knowing better. Why are people so protective of their status in Vermont? What drives this connection? And, what does this powerful connection inspire?

After reflecting on why I feel connected with Vermont, I latched on to one concept, sense of place, to attempt to define my personal affiliation with areas of northern Vermont. As I told interviewees time and time again,

I see it as more of an emotional attachment that is displayed through, for me at least, interacting with natural landscapes. So, I have a strong, deep sense of place in Stowe and I feel like I developed that through skiing, hiking, and exploring the surrounding land. Because that land was there, I was able to develop that attachment, and so I'd like to see that land continue to be free of development (Interview, September 8, 2015).

I see sense of place as a driving force for the land and culture of Vermont. In considering the varying definitions of sense of place, I happened upon somewhat of a divide, between recreation-based sense of place and productively-based sense of place. I explore this divide and its consequences for land conservation in Vermont. Despite the varying definitions of sense of place, this study relies deeply on the concept while exploring the cultural practices and mentalities within Vermont.

This study examines how a rural sense of place influences northern Vermonters to become interested in conserving the natural landscapes, and whether this conservation contributes to the preservation of Vermont's unique culture and identity. My research engages in the discussion of whether land conservation is a beneficial method of protecting the land, culture, and history for the greater population of Vermont. In analyzing this topic, I provide unique perspectives from conversations conducted with community members in Vermont. I unpack two theories within the ecological approach, political ecology and cultural ecology, and analyze both in relation to my findings.

Throughout this paper, I choose to use the first person because it contributes to a more natural discussion of my research. My own sense of place naturally causes me to view Vermont's culture with a slight bias, compared to that of an outsider. In a sense, my theorizing process was a reflection on my attachment to my home and an attempt to discover why this topic is so crucial within Vermont. As David Butz

and John Eyles (1997) argue, “place attachments are integral to self-definitions” (p. 2). My research on sense of place focuses on Vermonters more generally, but also involves a personal attempt to understand my self-definition. In revealing this, it seems necessary that I use the first person to explain my findings because my research is somewhat guided by personal experience.

Terminology

I use select terms, such as conservationⁱ, preservationⁱⁱ, and conservation easementⁱⁱⁱ. I differentiate between conservation and preservation by using conservation in terms of the environment and preservation in relation to the historical and cultural aspects of Vermont. Aside from the terms associated with conservation, I rely heavily on sense of place^{iv}. Sense of place is a widely debated concept, stemming from varying definitions within the social sciences, as well as a variety of terms used synonymously (such as “place attachment” and “community sentiment”). According to Jennifer Cross (2001), the anthropological definition of sense of place is:

The symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relation to the environment (Cross 2001:1).

In response to the variety of definitions, Cross developed six sense of place relationships – biographical, spiritual, ideological, narrative, commodified, and dependent (2001:3). For this study, biographical and commodified senses of place are the most relevant.

Biographical sense of place focuses on one's connection with a place developing over time, through being born in or living in a place (Cross 2001:3-4). Meanwhile, commodified sense of place develops because people choose a place based on a list of desirable traits and lifestyle preferences (Cross 2001:7-8). I maintain the broadness of my definition because most senses of place differ from others based on individual backgrounds and instilled cultural practices. Regardless of time spent in Vermont, I argue that any meaningful past experiences in a place contribute to a unique, individual connection with that area.

Comparing Vermont

Vermont is a state defined by its rural population. It is the only state in New England with a population under one million. Vermont has a land area of approximately 9,217 square miles, 75 percent being forestland. The local landscape naturally becomes an everyday consideration for people living in these rural areas due to the low density of residents. The tight-knit communities, outdoor recreation opportunities, and land-based jobs contribute to people forming deep connections. The longer individuals live in a community and the more they interact with local, natural amenities, the more likely they are to exhibit feelings of belonging and rootedness (Matarrita-Cascante, Stedman, and Luloff 2010:202). The emotional connections formed with the local landscape are representations of sense of place, or a demonstration of one's attachment to a place, whether it is a specific mountain, a community, or northern Vermont more generally.

But, Vermont is not the only state possessing unique qualities that drive sense-of-place definitions. Many compare Vermont to parts of Colorado or Wyoming because of the mountainous terrain and small, tight-knit communities. Vermont is not exceptional within the United States in fostering sense of place. This connection can be formed anywhere.

What makes Vermont different is the low population density amidst the relatively large population of New England. Vermont has maintained its forests and working lands, and sense of place continues to inform the preservation of these areas. The maintenance of the open landscapes also continues to draw tourists. For the greater northeast, Vermont is viewed as a place only a few hours drive away with scenic views and ample recreational opportunities. People continue to be drawn to the quiet communities with pleasant views of the surrounding hills. Vermont is an area known for its strong representation of *place*, displayed both in person and through the state's self-promotion.

In *Reconstructing the authenticity of place*, Sharon Zukin argues that three factors contribute to modern settlements developing distinctive and contrasting cultures.

First and most obvious, individuals must be free to exercise choice in where they live. Second, there must be a local history that exerts appeal to outsiders through the social construction of either a material or a symbolic landscape. Third, local entrepreneurs must use a marketing strategy that emphasizes some elements of this landscape while suppressing others. (Zukin 2001:161-162).

For Vermont, all three factors are easily visible, exemplified when Zukin uses Vermont as her primary example of "reconstructed place". Specifically, Zukin analyzes Stowe, a ski town in northern Vermont, and my hometown. The

reconstruction of place in Stowe is far greater than other areas of the state, areas that are not seen as attractive areas to settle. Stowe holds a ski area, endless hiking, beautiful streams, and a picturesque downtown with cute shops lining Main Street. Local ski history is displayed in the Stowe Ski Museum, steps away from the Town Hall and a quaint, historically significant inn. Every business owner in town profits from Stowe's place reputation, perpetuating the reconstruction of this place.

But when considering the three components of place, authenticity comes into question. At this point, with a solid year-round tourism industry and a strong second homeowner population, what is truly authentic in Stowe, and Vermont? Tourism is also said to lead to commoditization (Cohen 1988:372). Many tourists travel to Vermont in search of the authentic Vermont culture that has been advertised for decades, commoditizing the culture and practices of year-round Vermont residents. Vermonters realize this issue of authenticity, but commoditization allows for small businesses to succeed in small towns and rural regions. Authenticity is a socially constructed concept, and is therefore negotiable (Cohen 1988:374). Although commoditization and a lack of authenticity both hold negative connotations, sense of place may have the power to place more emphasis on the importance of the natural landscapes instead of the typical cultural practices and goods associated with "authentic" Vermont.

Theoretical Approach

The research I have conducted naturally feeds into the field of anthropology through my study of human connections with the land and the cultural practices

that shape those connections. The study also contributes to human cultural ecology in that the field is defined by how humans treat and view a place throughout time (Dear 1988:270). Among the sub-disciplines of the ecological approach, human cultural ecology is the most relevant for this study because it analyzes systems of human interaction (Dear 1988:270). It contributes to the analysis of the primary processes, (structures, institutions, and agents), which define the ideas of time and space (Dear 1988:269). Human cultural ecology delves into the relationship between humans and the natural environment over time. This relationship is crucial in understanding the development of sense of place in Vermont. I draw from the ecological approach because it encompasses how humans utilize cultural practices to adapt to their environments (Moberg 2013). Because I focus on Vermont's culture and practices in relation to sense of place, I find it more conducive to use the terminology associated with the ecological approach.

Materialism, the overarching theory that includes the ecological approach, assumes that the features of cultural systems can be explained in terms of the behaviors and technologies related to satisfying human subsistence needs (Moberg 2013). In the broadest sense, materialism contributes to the understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural environment. The ecological approach derives from an earlier tradition of geography and history, explaining the practice of applying cultural practices to features of geography or climate (Moberg 2013). In this context, I view sense of place as a cultural practice in response to the geographical and social features of Vermont. The theories of political ecology and

cultural ecology, both within the ecological approach, provide detailed examples of how cultural practices influence humans' treatment of their environments.

Political ecology looks more closely at the relationships between the political and economic factors that guide contestation over environmental changes. This theoretical approach studies how political and economic forces drive environmental degradation and influence environmental practice (Moberg 2013). From this approach, another perspective emerges, arguing that environmental changes do not affect all segments of society in the same way.

The political ecology approach helps to explain why some Vermonters oppose land conservation in their communities. The economic and social benefits of placing land in a conservation easement are drastically different than leaving the land open for development. Conservation can be viewed as restrictive because it has the potential to limit certain activities, such as using a trail system on private land. Parker Nichols, a native Vermonter, business owner, and forester in Marshfield, referenced this mentality in our phone conversation by mentioning, "When you talk about VLT [Vermont Land Trust^v], people are like, who are you saving it *for*?"

From the perspective of a person unaware of the benefits of conservation, land conservation may appear useless. Political ecology provides an interesting take on this debate because it unveils how politics and economics play a major role in the culture of conservation in different areas of Vermont. Political ecology opens up the discussion of how productively-based senses of place (typically associated with the working landscapes livelihood) compare to recreation-based senses of place, and

how these concepts create differences or gaps in the overarching culture of Vermont. Heather Furman, executive director of The Nature Conservancy in Montpelier, provided an accurate description of productively-based senses of place by stating, “There’s a lot of land-based work up there [the Northeast Kingdom], a lot of foresters, loggers, a little bit of agriculture, sugar makers. You’ve got a lot of people that are forced to get out into the landscape at a broad scale.”

Additionally, the areas with more opportunities for recreation, often the wealthier areas, typically drive conservation efforts. The direct and prominent connection between wealth, class, and land conservation has been well documented in this country by generations of academics and practitioners (peterforbes.org). The areas with large numbers of natural amenities are made up of populations that have formed senses of place focused on non-consumptive recreation (hiking, skiing, biking). There is less emphasis on the challenges presented by land conservation because there is less reliance on the land for one’s livelihood. Despite living in a rural area, surrounded by such natural beauty, “not everyone has the opportunity [or the resources and required knowledge] to go out and see these special places” (Interview, September 8, 2015), especially in a non-consumptive recreational context.

Political ecology brings to light many contested aspects of Vermont’s culture, specifically the debate over land conservation, stemming from the differences in the productively-based and recreation-based senses of place. But, aside from the contestation, sense of place remains a shared attachment for most residents and visitors alike. We bring to the places we live and visit a whole set of cultural

preconceptions that shape the way we respond to the place (Cross 2001:1). It is common for individuals to identify with a place, and feel they belong to it because they share social values and sentiments with others in that place (Butz & Eyles 1997:4). These community-based and land-based connections broadly unite Vermonters, and cause others to want to experience the area for themselves.

Cultural ecology explains how humans utilize their cultural practices in adapting to their environments (Moberg 2013). The cultural practices driving people's reactions to their environments inform sense of place and interactions with the surrounding landscapes. The strongest and most resilient senses of place are likely to emerge among individuals whose interactions with a place are rooted in numerous and ongoing ecological encounters, contextualized by a variety of everyday practical purposes (Butz & Eyles 1997:11). Sense of place contributes to a positive view of and appreciation for the local environment, through recreation and land-based jobs, making it a defining aspect of the culture and conservation of Vermont. Matt Langlais, a county forester in the Northeast Kingdom, explained this when stating, "The Northeast Kingdom is the most rural and remote part of the state and people's connection is through the land. Land is everything. Our land is our rooting to our sense of place." This reliance easily places the land as a core part of Vermont culture, and emphasizes the importance of land conservation in certain areas. Political ecology and cultural ecology explain how people react to their environmental surroundings, which I interpret from a rural perspective for this study.

By examining sense of place in Vermont within the frameworks of political and cultural ecology, I hope to describe why and how people form sense of place, and how this connection has the potential to shape the future of Vermont.

Regardless of a person's opinion of land conservation, their attachment to a rural place is driven by a connection with the land. This mentality is engrained in their cultural practices, and naturally alters their treatment of the environment. While living in rural areas, areas with noticeably less development, the open landscapes are always a consideration because they are constantly utilized and remain visible. Bob Heiser, a conservationist in Richmond, explained how his sense of place developed by stating, "I realized how much growth there is in other places that is impacting directly the natural world, the farmland, and how Vermont is pretty special in that it is largely intact still." The senses of place that many Vermonters have established over time have the potential to protect the lands of Vermont. The ideas driving political and cultural ecology come together to form a general understanding of how people in rural areas connect with their surroundings, and the subsequent influence on Vermont's culture and identity.

Literature Review

By incorporating ideas from outside sources, I provide background information that supports the themes within my study. I weave together arguments focusing on sense of place, the formation of sense of place for both permanent and seasonal residents, and the subsequent culture clash that occurs between these two drastically different types of residents.

One of the sources closely tied to my study is Jason Kaufman's and Matthew Kaliner's article: *The re-accomplishment of place in twentieth century Vermont and New Hampshire: history repeats itself until it doesn't*. Kaufman and Kaliner (2011) compare Vermont to its neighboring state, New Hampshire, to highlight how the development patterns of both states drastically differ from one another despite their close proximity. They argue that emerging stereotypes about a place draw sympathetic residents and visitors and encourage connections with that place. Kaufman and Kaliner readily agree that place in Vermont is "accomplished", while New Hampshire possesses a different place trajectory.

Historically, Vermont appealed to its vacation attractions in the mid- to late-twentieth century (contributing to "accomplished" place), causing a boost in eco-tourism and a desire to form a sense of place in this "idyllic" state (p. 136). Meanwhile, New Hampshire was consistently more accessible, and held modern conveniences (electricity) and incentives for businesses (p. 139). These stereotypes persist today and the number of visitors continues to increase in Vermont. So the question becomes: does sense of place contribute to a desire to preserve the natural landscapes and culture associated with Vermont amidst the constant threats of tourist development?

The article, *Permanent and Seasonal Residents' Community Attachment in Natural Amenity-Rich Areas*, written by David Matarrita-Cascante, Richard Stedman, and A.E. Luloff (2010), informs this question by discussing how different residents form attachments following landscape-based experiences. This source focuses on how permanent and seasonal residents differ in their strength of attachment to a

local area, a prevalent component in the study of sense of place in Vermont. The authors explain that, “Generally, attachment is important because it brings individuals together to work in favor of what they care about” (p. 215). This article clearly explains that anyone can form an attachment to a place, but seasonal residents appear to have more mobility in their decision to actively form this sense of place. Natural landscape-related factors lead to community attachment for both groups (p. 212), but the seasonal residents have the capacity to choose where they build or purchase residences and typically have prior knowledge of the social actors who live in the area. It becomes a much more conscious decision for seasonal residents.

The thought-out placement of seasonal residences causes certain areas to have higher numbers of part-time residents than others. Mt. Mansfield (the tallest peak in Vermont with one of the best ski resorts in the Northeast) is located in Stowe, and houses a large number of second homeowners. But, the neighboring towns of Wolcott and Hardwick (18 and 27 miles outside Stowe respectively) hold fewer recreational attractions, and therefore significantly lower numbers of seasonal residents. The areas with more seasonal residents are often the areas with the highest concentration of natural amenities, such as ski resorts, bodies of water, and public trail systems for biking, running, or hiking.

The large number of seasonal residents in natural amenity-rich areas easily contributes to “culture clash” between visitors and locals. Andrea Armstrong and Richard Stedman (2010) argue in their article, *Culture Clash and Second Home Ownership in the U.S. Northern Forest*, that differences in culture and socioeconomic

status are often the biggest contributors to this phenomenon. The authors (2011) conducted their research in the Northern Forest, located in upstate New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. For Vermont, Armstrong and Stedman highlight two townships in the Northeast Kingdom, Burke and Westmore specifically (Figures 1 & 2). Both towns are located in the most remote part of the state, known for quiet landscapes and sleepy villages, but also surprisingly high poverty rates. Despite the high poverty rates of permanent residents, more than 40 percent of all housing units in this region were second homes as of 2010 (p. 333).

When introducing their argument, the authors state, “Second home ownership represents an important form of amenity-based migration and contributes to rural community character and identity” (p. 319). A significant seasonal population feeds into the culture and identity of a place, regardless of the percentage of permanent residents. Armstrong and Stedman point out that the potential for culture clash may be particularly relevant in areas experiencing rural restructuring or transitioning from traditional, production-oriented land uses to more gentrified, recreational, or consumptive uses (p. 328). In the cases of Burke and Westmore, recent population increases have caused regional planners to promote town center revitalization, open space conservation programs, and public access to recreational activities, all of which contribute to culture clash. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, Burke hosts a ski area while Westmore rests on the shores of Lake Willoughby, both attractions drawing significant numbers of tourists and part-time residents every year. Armstrong and Stedman’s findings display that Vermont residents own significantly larger parcels of land than residents from the other

locations studied (p. 333), placing land use as an area of contestation. Within all the study sites, more frequent outdoor recreation and greater environmental concern intensified notions of culture clash (p. 340).

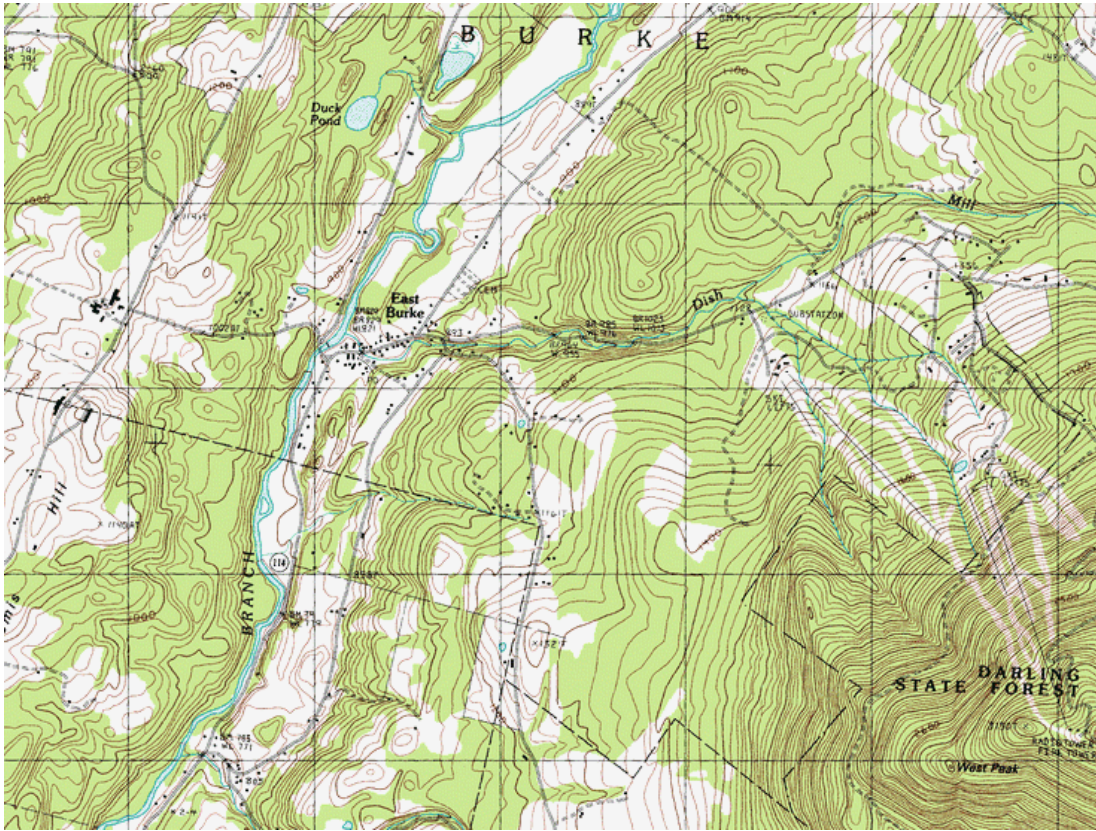


Figure 1: Town of East Burke and its surroundings. The ski area is in the northern region of the Darling State Forest.

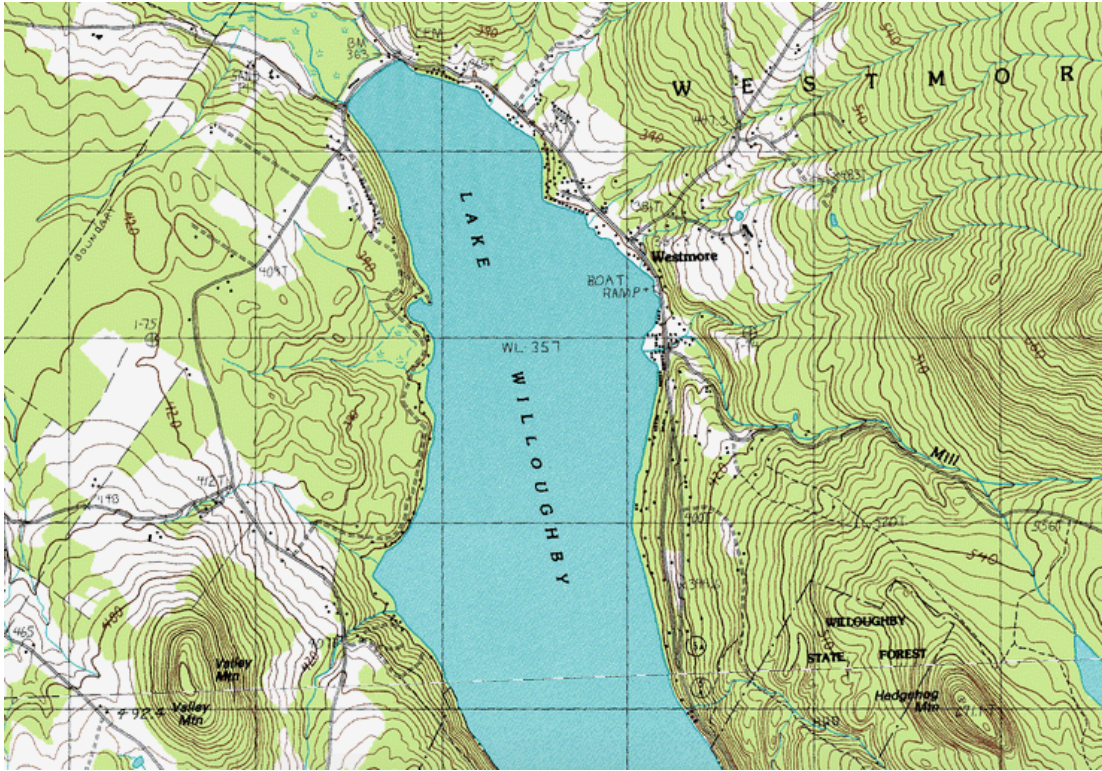


Figure 2: Town of Westmore and its surroundings.

The results of the three sources make it clear that Vermont is a place where people both in and out of state yearn to form a sense of place. But, in the pursuit of forming that connection, the culture and land are put in question. Outside influence has dominated Vermont's culture since the mid-twentieth century, and the increase in permanent residents, seasonal residents, and tourists continues to put pressure on the land that defines many people's senses of place.

Organization of Study

With previous knowledge of Vermont and basic preliminary research, it became apparent that there is a gap in the research of what inspires conservation in Vermont and what aspects of the state culture are contributing to the preservation of place in an area defined by tourism. Although Vermont is known for its impressive preservation of land, culture, and history, development remains a constant threat. The reputation and stereotypes surrounding the Green Mountains cause people from out-of-state to purchase second homes or make the move permanently. Vermont holds a small, year-round population of 626,562 people, but welcomes an average of 26,475 out-of-state movers every year (Maciag 2013). This influx of people, and the subsequent increase in population, directly influences the conservation of the state as land uses and cultural values change.

This study was conducted in northern Vermont (Figures 3 and 4). The northern region of the state was chosen because parts of the region are considered to be the most rural parts of the state (Figure 4), as well as areas containing the strongest senses of place and large socioeconomic diversity^{vi}. I define northern Vermont as the eight northernmost counties of the state (Figure 3).

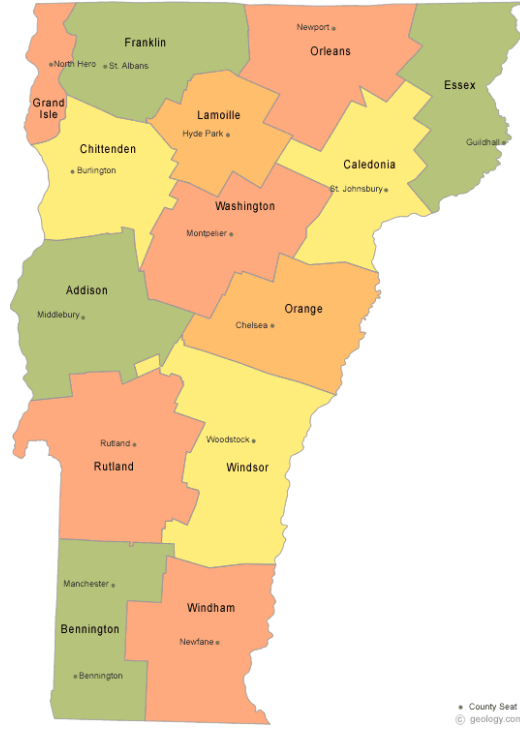


Figure 3: Map depicting counties of Vermont, specifically I designate Grand Isle, Franklin, Orleans, Essex, Chittenden, Lamoille, Caledonia, and Washington counties as northern Vermont.



Figure 4: Vermont (highlighted in red) in relation to the greater United States.

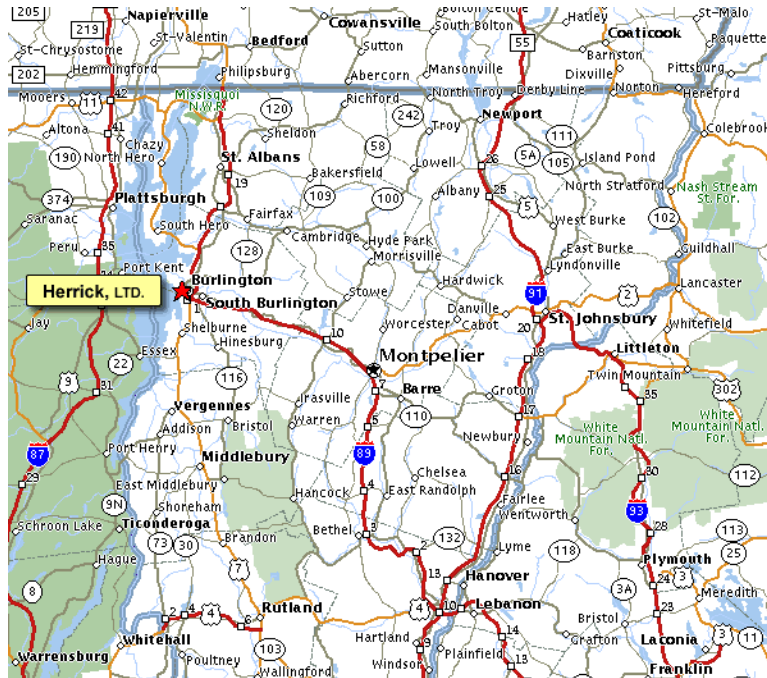


Figure 5: The general region of northern Vermont.

I conducted a total of twelve interviews, with participants from the towns of Burlington, Stowe, Montpelier, Richmond, East Burke, and Marshfield. Participants hold positions in the fields of land conservation, forestry, local business, rural development, historical preservation, and education^{vii}. I compared my previous knowledge of Vermont with current interview data^{viii} and research to better understand perspectives on land conservation and the future of Vermont (See Figures 6-8 below). The interviews conducted provided the study with powerful quotes, an opportunity to connect with community members, and a chance to hear in detail why people want to protect Vermont.



Figure 6: Views to the north from the summit of Mount Mansfield – the states highest peak at 4,393 feet. (Stowe, VT, June 2014).



Figure 7: The landscape of the Northeast Kingdom (Greensboro, VT, August 2014).

Balancing New and Old in the Green Mountains

“In the eyes of many, typical Vermonters literally embodied the state’s rural identity; to know the typical Vermonter, they suggested, was to know the state as a whole” (Harrison 2006: 51).

Sense of Place

I met Paul Costello on a street corner in Montpelier one morning in early September. We strolled over to a local breakfast joint and discussed Paul’s role as executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development. As I dug into my raspberry buckwheat pancakes topped with local syrup, Paul dove into the importance of sense of place. During our conversation, he easily explained, “The whole idea of digging into Vermont and a sense of place inevitably comes to the dialogue of how we preserve this place and how important the natural resources of the state are to us as a people.” The idea that sense of place supports conservation was prevalent throughout my research. All twelve participants supported the idea that sense of place is a crucial component in contributing to preserving Vermont’s character, which is mainly constituted by the landscapes.

The somewhat rehearsed, but incredibly genuine, response to the sense of place question occurred at every interview. Vermonters want to share their sense of place story, and they know exactly what to say and why, especially this group, most of who have been working to foster and promote sense of place in Vermont throughout their careers (Table 1). As Paul stated, “You don’t need to force anybody to talk about these things. It’s what we care about. When people [in Vermont] speak from the heart, they’re talking about their sense of place a lot.”

The occupations of the participants guided which individuals could speak to certain aspects of my study in detail. The conservationists were clearly more informed on the current status of land conservation throughout Vermont, while the rural development specialist and the historic preservationist spoke more to how Vermont has the potential to maintain its character through cultural and historical preservation and community organization and development. The diverse occupations of the participants display the importance and prevalence of utilizing sense of place as a tool to protect Vermont.

Participants' Trades

Conservationist	Forester	Business Owner	Professor	Rural Development Specialist	Historic Preservationist
5	2	1	2	1	1

Table 1: Three of the conservationists interviewed are executive directors of their respective organizations, while the remaining two are regional director and conservation manager. One of the foresters manages their own business, while the other holds the position of county forester. The business owner, professors, and rural development specialist all focus on sense of place within their respective fields. The historic preservationist specializes in protecting culturally and historically significant places throughout Vermont.

Length of Time in Vermont

More than 20 years	8
Less than 20 years	4

Table 2: Despite the length of time spent in Vermont, all participants spoke of their strong senses of place with specific areas throughout the state. Although all based in the same general region, each definition involved descriptions of different areas and geographical features (Lake Champlain, the Mad River Valley, the Worcester Range, etc.) displaying the individual nature of sense of place.

After reviewing my interview material, three subcategories within sense of place clearly emerged. The three subcategories that I most often encountered are recreation-based, productively-based, and community-based senses of place (Table 3). The participants rarely voiced these terms specifically, but the three subcategories accurately represent and contribute to a degree of specificity within the concept for this study. The length and scope of this study limits my ability to determine what specifically contributes to these subcategories (socioeconomic status, region of Vermont, etc.) (Table 3).

Subcategories of Sense of Place

Recreation-Based	7
Productively-Based	6
Community-Based	9

Table 3: The numbers within each category do not produce a total of twelve because I found it more appropriate to designate some participants' senses of place as falling under more than one subcategory. It could be said that every participant holds aspects of every subcategory within their sense of place, but I chose to differentiate between the participants' definitions based on what each person highlighted throughout our conversation.

It appears that the foresters I spoke with naturally possess productively-based senses of place because of their understanding of the productivity of farmland and forestland, and their reliance on forest products for their livelihood. Parker Nichols, the forester in Marshfield, exemplifies this productively-based sense of place. He stated in our conversation, "I just feel really proud and grateful that I get to do this. My income is not huge or anything, but it's being able to play a part in the continuation of it – the traditional North Country working class livelihood." Nichols

maintains such a deep connection with the land of northern Vermont because he requires it in his everyday life.

Descriptions of recreation-based and community-based senses of place were prevalent throughout my research, likely because of the symbiotic nature of the two. Approximately six participants cited specifically that strong communities and recreational opportunities on Vermont's lands are driving forces behind their senses of place. As part of his explanation of sense of place, Chris Boget contributed, "It's amazing that we're protecting things forever so people can always walk there, they can always hike there. I always think it's just such an important sense of place." Similar to Boget's point, Matt Langlais, a forester in the Northeast Kingdom, stated in a phone conversation, "It's really phenomenal how many of your neighbors you see out on the trails, and the community that that brings is really phenomenal because all this is happening on private land." The ties between community-based and recreation-based senses of place and land conservation are strong.

Although recreation-based senses of place may be more common throughout Vermont, this connection arguably involves the most commodities to sustain itself. Recreation-based senses of place feed off access to trails, lift tickets, ski condos, and hefty amounts of outdoor gear. Massive amounts of resources are required to keep the chairlifts running every winter. Additionally, large numbers of people on public trails in the summer lead to erosion and destruction of flora. Recreation-based senses of place require capital in a way that productively-based and community-based senses of place cannot fathom.

Perspectives on Land Conservation

When asked what constitutes the culture or character of Vermont, most people I spoke with immediately focused on two aspects: the importance of the “working landscapes” and the amount of time spent in Vermont. Participants also touched on other aspects of the culture, such as the unique scale of Vermont, the natural blending of people, and the insular communities that the dramatic geographical features naturally create.

Although it was widely agreed that sense of place contributes to an interest in the health of Vermont’s landscapes, there was a noted tension in some conversations regarding the effectiveness and true purpose of land conservation. This tension arose mostly in response to how people utilize and interact with the natural landscapes. A conservationist is likely to have a different perspective on the benefits of land conservation compared to that of a forester, which is exactly what I heard. One of the main arguments against land conservation is the preconception that it is elitist and only benefits recreational land users.

Parker Nichols, the forester from Marshfield, provides a wonderful perspective that displays the other side of the coin. During our phone conversation Parker simply stated, “I think there’s definitely a rural backlash, to some extent, to the whole land conservation movement.” For the Vermont residents that heavily rely on the land for their income, placing land in strict conservation easements limits this population’s work and wellbeing.

When considering land conservation, it became clear that buying massive amounts of land to place under strict conservation easements may not be the

ultimate answer. There are many more factors that come into play based on local livelihoods and varying degrees of reception. Parker Nichols aptly described this by saying,

It's not just all great to be conserving land. I certainly understand it, and agree with it for the most part, but I think that it's not necessarily going to affect lower income people. And I think someone who gets to drive down the road and see a beautiful landscape, it affects us all in a positive way. But, I think that it can be somewhat more complicated than just being an absolutely always fabulous thing.

Paul Costello contributed to this point by stating, "One of the dangers of conservation per se is that it can build investment in parklands for the well to do." Land conservation quickly becomes a sticky subject because of the diversity of people and industries affected.

It appears that populations geared more towards productively-based sense of place are wary of conservation because of their reliance on the land for their income and livelihood. But, one strategy that brings both perspectives together is the practice of implementing specific conservation easements on farmland and forestland. More than four hundred acres of farmland have been conserved, making Vermont the third state in the nation with the most acres of farmland conserved (Daniels 2001). Organizations, such as the Vermont Land Trust and the Stowe Land Trust, work with landowners to give them the ability to continue the working lands tradition with the knowledge that their land is forever protected from development, regardless of whether they have successors to pass the land down to. Despite the degree of reception, the land that is being placed in easements is an enormous part of the Vermont culture and image.

Capturing the Culture and Identity of Vermont

The health of the working landscapes is constantly mentioned as a crucial part of maintaining the identity of Vermont. The working landscapes feed into the stereotypical Vermont image - rolling hills, with quaint, tight-knit communities scattered throughout. Although many areas of Vermont encompass this naturally beautiful image, most of the participants agreed that the working landscapes require an economic foundation to actually remain “working”. Farmers and foresters rely on their land-based income to sustain themselves, but development can often serve as a helpful solution if the farm or forest product industry is suffering.

Throughout many of the conversations, responses referenced this vicious cycle that Vermont appears to be caught in. People develop a sense of place in Vermont because they witness the beauty and tradition of the working landscapes, so they want to protect this land for the views, but in protecting that land there is a threat that there will not be an economy to support that land and its productivity. And, as more people flock to Vermont, the threat of development continues to rise. As Paul Costello concisely stated, “The fundamental challenge for land conservation is the fact that if there is no economy that supports land and production, farms die.”

Another aspect of Vermont culture that was frequently mentioned is the subtle competition that Vermont residents have with each other to determine who has lived in the state the longest, and therefore who is more tied to the place. This idea is reinforced by the usage of terms such as “flatlander”, and through anecdotes such as the early morning cab ride I mentioned earlier. Kristin Sharpless, the

conservation manager of the Stowe Land Trust, explained, “It seems like a particular thing to Vermont. There’s this pride that comes along with how long your family has lived here, and you almost don’t get the right to be a Vermonter unless you have that lineage.” This competition only contributes to the desire to spend time and establish a strong sense of place in Vermont.

The looming Green Mountains and the flowing rivers running through the valleys create small, insular communities, which leads to a natural blending of people. The dramatic landscapes, working lands, and recreational opportunities bring people together, as everyone begins to rely on one another due to the remoteness. Caitrin Maloney, executive director of the Stowe Land Trust, accurately sums up this view of the landscape by explaining,

It’s sort of like a fabric, which I think is great. It’s perfect. I don’t think we want homogeneity. There’s still in some places a strong agricultural feel. There are places where there is a really intensive tourism aspect, so Stowe would be in that category. There are places where you feel like you’re out in the frontier of logging.

Contributing to this idea, Heather Furman stated, “There are many different interpretations of who Vermonters are and what Vermont is. I think that’s a healthy thing.” Clearly, Vermont’s landscapes and communities are recognized as crucial parts of the state’s overarching culture. But, as Vermont’s culture changes alongside the composition of the population, the prevalence of working landscapes, open lands, and insular communities will also continue to change.

The natural landscapes are, without a doubt, one of the most important aspects of Vermont. They define Vermont’s identity and define many individuals’ senses of place. But, land use introduces degrees of contestation. As Blake Harrison

explains in his book, *The View From Vermont*, “Over the past century, Americans have learned through the tourist experience to see rural landscapes for leisure and recreation while still wanting (and needing) them to be places of work” (Harrison 2006: 239). Increases in tourism and seasonal residents only maintain that expectation.

Rural Development and Growth

To hold a strong sense of place in Vermont is equated with having spent considerable time in the area. The desire to spend time in Vermont and form this connection increases tourism, the number of second homeowners, and the overall population of the state. A majority of the people I spoke with were once flatlanders themselves (Table 2), my family included. While speaking with Walter Poleman of the Place Program at the University of Vermont he explained, “I often think that the people that come here choose this place, and that’s as powerful a thing as being born in a place, in my mind.” Paul Costello, elaborated on this point:

People who move here are actually moving here because they aspire, they value something in Vermont. In particular, they’re attracted by the community, culture of neighborliness, which is really rooted in our sense of place too. It’s a part of our agricultural tradition. Newcomers coming in are less the danger. The danger is that we have land use laws that have set a pattern of 10-acre development, so that everybody gets their little farm.

The gradual increase of “flatlanders” looking to buy land in Vermont has caused the land to become subdivided into small ten-acre parcels. The natives who have lived in the state for decades and the newcomers who have only lived in the state a few years both realize that this is a special place, but tension arises when considering the future of Vermont’s land and the increasing threat of development.

One of the final questions in every conversation asked how Vermont should ideally look in the future. A number of people stated that they would love to base future stewardship around the values of the community. Caitrin Maloney said, "I'd like to see Vermont have nice, vibrant towns and villages with open land around, but I think it remains to be seen if that will happen." Every person is optimistic for the future, but there was a noted hesitation when responding to this question. Amidst the optimism, most participants' responses conveyed that there is a strict timeline for Vermont, and depending on which direction the state takes, the culture, history, and environment of the state could be forever altered. Paul Costello corroborated this point when saying, "Ensure for the next generation that land is open and available to us and not conserving it just for the view shed is another crucial aspect of us feeling a deep attachment to that sense of place." Sense of place could be the factor that contributes to a balance of conserving resources for the future and sustainable growth within Vermont. People will fight for open land because of their deep connections with it, but also so their kids and grandkids can savor that pull to the land as well.

The question that seemed to cause the most anxiety was that of how Vermont should change, but still maintain its uniqueness. The answer to most problems is that working farmland and forestland need to be placed in conservation easements, but allowed certain practices so that the working lands tradition can continue in Vermont for years to come. The future of Vermont is in the hands of the farmers, foresters, and conservationists.

Thoughts on the Future of Vermont

"Rather than say where do we disagree and argue, say where do we agree and what could be a point for some collective action?" - Paul Costello

Every time I arrive home from school I can expect that my mom will brag about her newest trail. In high school, I resented her constant nagging about going for hikes. Following typical teenager fashion, I would much rather have spent my time shredding the slopes of the local ski resort with my friends. But, as I grew older, and left the northeast for the west, I gained a deep appreciation for the natural landscapes of my home in Vermont. I began to ask my mom to show me her trails, to relinquish her secrets of special spots hidden amongst the Green Mountains.

When I arrived home in December for my last winter break as a college student, the ground was bare and I comfortably wore a light jacket outside, unheard of at that time of year. I spent a few days pouting and praying for snow, but soon realized this was the perfect opportunity to explore Mom's latest trail. Mom cleared her day, I shuffled the dogs into the trunk of the car, and we set off. Soon we were parking in a small pull-off on a dirt road, dogs yapping, Mom and me smiling. We set off up the road, following it up as far as we could go, eventually reaching the top of a ridge.

We sat on the spine of the Worcester Range looking directly across our valley at Mount Mansfield. The landscape appeared as a giant patchwork quilt, gently waving its way over the hills and valleys. This small area easily revealed defining aspects of the greater Vermont landscape: farmland, forestland, recreation areas,

protected land, small villages, second homes, and old, crumbling farmhouses. All come together to form the place that Vermonters and visitors admire. I am lucky to have the ability to periodically witness the unique fabric of the Vermont landscape: diverse, but somehow cohesive.

A few initiatives contribute to this cohesiveness, to this ability to bring the diverse land uses together. Two specific initiatives that many people referenced are the Current Use Program and the Council on the Future of Vermont. The Current Use Program is a tax program that allows landowners to have their land taxed on its ability to produce either forest products or agricultural products instead of the land's potential for development (Interview, October 12, 2015). When explaining this program, Matt Langlais stated, "I understand that there's value in our forests as long as it's done well and done right. We can strike that balance. Between preservation and absolute commercialism." One of the major benefits of this program is that it partially alleviates the pressure for farmers and foresters to sell land to development. About one third of Vermont's total land area is enrolled in Current Use (Rural Vermont Website). The Current Use Program enables residents relying on the land to receive certain benefits in order to continue the working lands tradition.

While the Current Use Program helps certain landowners financially, the Council on the Future of Vermont contributed to the study of culture within Vermont. This survey reviewed what Vermonters value, and whether those values are collective. "The highest ranking value in Vermont, above the love of community which was huge, and above affordability, was the working landscapes heritage"

(Interview, September 2, 2015). Paul Costello, who was deeply involved in the survey, explained, “This whole study really pointed to the importance of the working landscapes as a foundation for who we are as a people and our very deep sense of place.” Both initiatives speak to Vermonters’ desires to understand and protect the values and heritage of the working landscapes. But, despite these programs and surveys attempting to maintain the health of the land and culture of Vermont, there is still work to be done.

In response to my findings, I suggest that a greater appreciation for others’ senses of place is necessary in understanding the importance of the various land uses throughout the state. Despite possessing a predominantly recreation-based sense of place, I realize the importance of productively-based senses of place and the associated working lands heritage. A healthy balance between recreation, working landscapes, and protected land will hopefully encourage widespread agreement.

The main theme that tied every conversation together was each participant’s desire to protect Vermont environmentally and culturally. The people of Vermont are naturally intertwined with the health of the landscapes, directly influencing the culture and identity of the state. Sense of place puts the health and openness of the land as a top priority. Utilizing the Current Use Program and implementing specific conservation easements will allow for the sustainable growth of Vermont while also promoting others to begin forming strong connections with the rural landscapes.

Conclusions

“Place is really about a geographic setting where nature and culture intertwine and unfold through time.”
- Walter Poleman

There are clearly many people who actively work to protect Vermont environmentally and culturally, but there still seems to be a sense of nervousness surrounding the future. This study used sense of place as a lens through which I could inspect perspectives on the preservation of Vermont. Sense of place served as an incredibly beneficial method of hearing about people’s connections with a place renowned for its relative lack of change over the past few decades.

Although almost a year-long project, there continues to be space for more research and thought. Interviews with farmers and foresters, most likely possessing productively-based senses of place, would be helpful in broadening my findings on the role of land conservation for the populations involved in maintaining the working landscapes of northern Vermont^{ix}. Discovering the common ground that unites residents and visitors will contribute to a mentality that treats Vermont with the appreciation it deserves. As the threat of development continues to cast a dark shadow over the state, sense of place serves as the reminder of why people are so protective of this place. The divide between recreation-based and productively-based senses of place may continue, but hopefully one can inform the other to establish a healthy conservation network in Vermont. Both the land and the working lands heritage may be threatened, but Vermonters’ connections with both will never waiver.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ *Conservation*: In relation to conserving the land and environment.
- ⁱⁱ *Preservation*: In relation to preserving the identity, history, and culture of Vermont.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Conservation Easement*: A legal agreement that ensures a property will never be subdivided or developed (Vermont Land Trust website). This allows landowners to sell certain property rights, specifically their development rights, and still have the ability to sell the land. This form of conservation allows the landowners to maintain ownership, and often keeps the land private, but still allows for the continuation of traditional uses (typically farming or recreation in Vermont). Regardless of who owns the land in the future, the conservation easement will remain in place forever.
- ^{iv} *Sense of Place*: I define sense of place as one's individual and unique connection with a place, based on past experiences in that place.
- ^v The Vermont Land Trust was founded in 1977 in Montpelier, VT. This non-profit organization, now with offices throughout the state, is working towards "conserving land for the future of Vermont" (VLT website), specifically focusing on protecting Vermont's working landscapes (typically farmland or forestland). As of 2009, VLT had conserved more than 500,000 acres (VLT website).
- ^{vi} Essex County, located in the Northeast Kingdom, holds 9.5 people per square mile, and a total population of 6,125 people, making it the least populous county in Vermont and New England (U.S. Census Bureau).
- ^{vii} I prepared a consent form that informed all participants of the intentions of my research, and received IRB approval before starting the interview process. The participants I met in person each signed a consent form, while the subjects reached via phone provided verbal consent. Nine participants were male and three participants were female. Eight interviews were conducted in the participants' offices, and the remaining four interviews were conducted over the phone. During each interview I worked from a list of questions I had compiled beforehand (See Appendix A).
- ^{viii} I coded the interviews to determine what pieces of each conversation were most important to my study. In coding the interviews, I established relevant categories and placed important sections of every interview within these categories. The categories I implemented were: the culture of Vermont, sense of place, economically-based sense of place, recreation-based sense of place, community-based sense of place, developing a sense of place, development of Vermont, benefits of land conservation, economic aspects/contestation of land conservation, driving factors of conservation, and the future of conservation/Vermont land.

^{ix} The research for this study was conducted throughout my senior year at Colorado College. I conducted interviews in Vermont in late August and early September 2015 and supplemented with phone interviews conducted remotely from Colorado in late September and early October. While in Vermont, I also developed a list of sources necessary for my literature review. Additional research and the writing process continued throughout the remainder of the academic year.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Sense of Place

1. What is your occupation?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. How long have you lived in the place where you currently live?
4. Do you feel more of a connection with your hometown or where you currently live? Where do you consider “home”?
 - a. What are you specifically connected to? Why?
5. How do you define sense of place, or one’s connection to a place?
6. How do you “connect” with a place significant to you emotionally or physically?
7. Do you think your occupation, or organization as a whole, specifically has played a role in your sense of place?
8. Why is sense of place important to you and how is that shown through your organization?

Land Conservation

1. Do you think one’s deep connection with a place is a factor in one’s desire to conserve land?
2. Do you think conserving land can contribute to the conservation of Vermont’s culture or personality?
3. What influences the conservation of land in Northern Vermont?
4. What changes would you like to see occur in the management of the land in Northern Vermont?

Vermont Culture

1. What do you think is Northern Vermont’s culture or identity?

2. Does your organization/business promote the preservation of Vermont's identity?
 - a. What role does land conservation play in that?
 - b. Can land conservation play a role in cultural conservation also?
3. How do you think Vermont can improve the preservation of its identity in the future?
4. Are community members approachable/willing to work towards your organization's mission?
 - a. What inspires them to become involved?
5. Do you think your work is well received by the community you work in?
6. Do you collaborate with other conservationists/organizations in Vermont (or beyond) to work towards a similar goal?
 - a. If so, how is their interaction with their local communities similar or different than what you have experienced with your organization?
Examples?

**** Ending question:** What do you hope for when considering the future of Vermont in regards to conservation and/or Vermont's evolving culture?