

# **"Land Trusts as Responsible Citizens: Community Building through Land Conservation"**

**Thursday, April 5, 2007 – UVM Rubenstein Lecture Series  
Gil Livingston, President of Vermont Land Trust  
Chair of the Center for Whole Communities Board**

Let me start by expressing my pride, my gratitude for the University of Vermont (my alma mater), and more particularly for some of my personal heroes associated with UVM.

To set the context, I'd like to quote at length from Wendell Berry's 1996 essay "The Whole Horse." In that piece, Berry wrote:

“What, then, is the countervailing idea by which we might correct the industrial idea? We will not have to look hard to find it, for there is only one, and that is agrarianism. The fundamental difference between industrialism and agrarianism is this: Whereas industrialism is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology, agrarianism is a way of thought based on land. Agrarianism, furthermore, is a culture at the same time that it is an economy. . .”

“An agrarian economy rises up from the fields, woods and streams – from the complex of soils, slopes, weathers, connections, influences, and exchanges that we mean when we speak, for example, of the local community or the local watershed. The agrarian mind is therefore not regional or national, let alone global, but local. It must know on intimate terms the local plants and animals and local soils; it must know local possibilities and impossibilities, opportunities and hazards. It depends on knowing very particular local histories and biographies. . .”

“Agrarian people of the present, knowing that the land must be well cared for if anything is to last, understand the need for a settled connection, not just between farmers and their farms, but

between urban people and their surrounding and tributary landscapes. Because the knowledge and know-how of good caretaking must be handed down to children, agrarians recognize the necessity of preserving the coherence of families and communities.

I would like my fellow conservationists to notice how many people and organizations are now working to save something of value – not just wilderness places, wild rivers, wildlife habitat, species diversity, water quality, and air quality, but also agricultural land, family farms and ranches, communities, children and childhood, local schools, local economies, local food markets, livestock breeds and domestic plant varieties, fine old buildings, scenic roads, and so on. I would like my fellow conservationists to understand also that there is hardly a small farm or ranch or locally owned restaurant or store or shop or business anywhere that is not struggling to conserve itself. All of these people, who are fighting sometimes lonely battles to keep things of value that they cannot bear to lose, are the conservation movement’s natural allies.”

Here at UVM, I believe Wendell Berry would be proud of the agrarianism-in action:

- **Hub Vogel**man was a national leader in the fight against acid rain, but his heart and his research embraced his home in Vermont’s Green Mountains.
- My friend **Walter Poleman**, collaborating with Meghan Camp of Shelburne Farms has created the very innovative, compelling PLACE (Place-based Landscape Analysis and Community Education) program, which reflects Wendell Berry’s admonition to focus on the “settled connection, not just between farmers and their farms, but between urban people and their surrounding and tributary landscapes.”
- And under the new leadership of my good friend **David Brynn**, UVM’s Jericho Research Forest has been transformed into a safe haven for community forestry, searching for what Berry

years for: “a working model of a thoroughly diversified and integrated, ecologically sound, local forest economy.”

- As a staff member shared by the Vermont Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy, UVM botanist **Liz Thompson** feeds the natural curiosity of conservationists and Vermont land owners and helps us make the very best choices about protection strategies on working lands.
- **Vern Grubinger**, VLT Board member and former director of UVM’s Sustainable Ag Program is a leader in examining economically viable bio-fuel alternatives for Vermont farmers, focused on farm sustainability and not on global fuels markets.
- **Steve Libby and Matt Kolan** (with Walter Poleman) have developed an innovative residential community of UVM students in the new environmental “Green House,” including a “guild” system that provides hands-on proficiency in disciplines ranging from GIS analysis to furniture building.

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In ways similar to these UVM efforts, the future of the land conservation movement lies in what I will label “community building.” And along with others around the country, the Vermont Land Trust is navigating these uncharted waters.

First, a bit of context:

By their history, land trusts had a tendency to operate privately: board member selection and activities tended to be a private matter, they need not be membership organizations, conservation transactions were largely a matter of private negotiation, tax code incentives increased the cloak of privacy. But land trust transaction volume/impact remained relatively low – “below the radar screen.”

But land trusts are now part of American culture, and no where is that more true than in Vermont.

Some numbers from the 2005 Land Trust Alliance Census:

- Acres protected rose from 20 million in 2000 to 37 million in 2005
- Number of land trusts rose from 1,200 to 1,600
- Land protected through conservation easements increased from 2.5 million acres to 6.2 million
- State and local land trusts' piece of the conservation pie has grown: they conserved an average of 338,000 acres per year from '95 to 2000, but 1.17 million acres per year since 2000.

Vermont Land Trust:

We have conserved 7.8% of Vermont - more than 450,000 acres

640 farm parcels totaling 153,000 acres

520 easement donations totaling 93,600 acres

Current pace of 70 to 90 transactions per year

Stewarding 1,450 parcels and growing

We have 42 employees and an operating budget of \$3.8 million.

Land trusts of all types and scales operate in VT: national, regional, local each with a different primary focus.

The land trust movement in VT and across the country has grown, in part, because governmental regulation, traditional environmental advocacy, and market-based strategies are not effective standing alone. But with this growth comes elevated community expectations: VLT must increasingly behave as a mature member of Vermont society by, within its core areas of competence, helping confront challenges to Vermont culture.

I argue that VLT and other land trusts must now engage in:

- Community building.
- Participatory conservation.
- Articulating a shared land ethic.

I. Community Building Can land conservation contribute to community vitality?

**Traditional examples:**

- Farmland conservation – operating farm blocks, a traditional role of purchase of development rights programs (SLIDE: Franklin County Conserved Farm Block)
- Forest land conservation – try to end boom-and-bust cycles associated with “industrial” forest ownership (SLIDE: VLT-TNC Atlas Timberlands Partnership)
- Ballfields, swimming holes, town greens: (SLIDES: Cota Ball Field, Worcester Town Green, Pikes Falls swimming hole)

**New roles:**

- Farmland Access: help start new enterprises (SLIDE: Elmer Farm).
- Wood products: conservation flooring enterprise – connecting consumers with forest stewardship, and improve returns for small-holders (SLIDE: flooring)
- Affordable housing: rural housing needs (SLIDE: Hancock Meadow housing)
- Wealth building: Vermont Family Forests - VLT and Little Hogback. Limited liability corporation with 16 shareholders at \$3,000 per share with one-half available to people below 50% of Addison County median income (\$59,600)
- Integrating biology into working lands conservation: (SLIDE: DeVos Farm Conservation Map)
- Community economics:

Preservation Trust of Vermont's purchase of the Latchis Hotel in downtown Brattleboro

(SLIDE: Latchis Theater)

VLT helping Brattleboro Area Farmers Market buy a market site (SLIDE: BAFM)

II. Participatory Conservation: Can land conservation build upon the Vermont town meeting tradition of participatory democracy at a town scale?

Examples:

- PLACE role in engaging communities, linked to “conservation planning” (SLIDE: PLACE overview)
- Projects that mobilize community grass roots: Russell Farm, Hinesburg (SLIDE)
- Engaging communities in using conservation to serve community goals: Stranahan – Marshfield Town Forest

Future focus: helping towns build capacity to address their own growth challenges

III. Articulating a Shared Land Ethic: We must return to the question: Why Vermont? (SLIDE: old barn door)

- What is it about Vermont that is so intoxicating, so compelling?
- Why did you come here? Why do you stay here? Why did you return?
- Does land and its resources contribute to your answers and, if so, in what way?

To provide a framework for conversations with landowners, communities and members, VLT has articulated a “land ethic” – 3 spheres:

1. Care for natural resources: air, water, soil, habitat, scenery
2. Importance of community economics: land-based enterprises and smart growth principles
3. Advancing community equity and fairness: affordable and healthy food, clean air and water, safe and affordable housing, and access to the spiritual and recreational benefits of land.

This focus on ethics and values also means a change in practices: (SLIDE: Center for Whole Communities)

1. Building a different kind of conservation leadership: CWC's focus on "whole community thinking" where land lies at the nexus of community health, social justice, and ecological vitality.
2. Creating different measures of success: Numerical measures play an important role, but how can we measure values and the application of values to land conservation.  
Measures of Health.
3. Expanding the people-land connection: expand, diversify the opportunities for citizens and visitors to connect with our land –
  - Jericho Research Forest and community forestry
  - Field trips, farm tours, outdoor recreation, artistic expression . . .

In closing, I believe land is at the foundation of our Vermont culture, our community economics, and our spiritual health. The way we treat land, engage with land says much about our future as a culture and about our relationships with each other as human beings. I hope VLT can play an ever more productive role in supporting healthy people-land relationships. And as Wendell Berry put it, you and I are among the people "fighting sometimes lonely battles to keep things of value that they cannot bear to lose," and I look forward to this work in partnership with many of you and this University.