

Saturday, June 19, 2010

Baby boomers need to step up to plate

A few weeks before New Hampshire lawmakers voted to again eviscerate the state's Land Conservation and Heritage Investment Program by taking away 60 percent of the revenue dedicated to funding the program, a group of New England scientists came out with a report extolling the virtues of preserving at least 70 percent of the region's forests and farms.

The grim fiscal reality of the region's states is sorely at odds with the goal of the Harvard University's study "Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape." It will take a monumental effort by those who care about the fate of the region's landscape and way of life for anything close to the group's goal to be achieved.

As most schoolchildren learn, when the settlers encountered America's vast forests, they cut them down as expeditiously as possible. New Hampshire's woodlands all but vanished. It was out of such arboreal carnage that the conservation movement was formed.

The region's forests regenerated, and great swaths of them are no longer being clear cut. New England's woodlands are instead suffering death from a thousand cuts. Forests are being fragmented by roads and lost to development.

To save enough to preserve what all residents and visitors love will take what, in the short run, seems like a sacrifice. In the long run, for the sake of the planet, it is a necessity.

The Legislature's cost-cutting couldn't come at a worse time. Forests, as recently as 1950 or 1960, covered nearly 90 percent of New Hampshire. That has fallen to 79 percent despite strong conservation efforts.

As soon as the economy returns to health, development pressure will swell and more land will be cleared. At the moment, land is cheap and climate change has made the need to preserve it stronger than ever.

The Harvard study says that to reach the 70 percent goal, land will have to be protected at twice the current rate. The report's authors, who failed to include a hard-nosed realist from the Granite State, made a number of recommendations.

They would like to see increased federal funding, state income tax deductions for conservation easements, expanded regional partnerships, increased philanthropic efforts and more revenue

sources dedicated to conservation. All are good ideas. But New Hampshire's surcharge on real estate filing fees was a dedicated source of revenue, and lawmakers just stole it.

Saving New England's forestlands will take a concerted effort by hikers, hunters, farmers, anglers and all lovers of beautiful vistas, rural life and a healthy environment.

The much-maligned baby boom generation has a chance to step up to the plate. Many of them own or stand to inherit land or money from the previous generation.

That generation – those who served in Vietnam are a glaring exception – got off pretty easy. They have a chance to serve now. They could leave their mark by donating forestland or protecting it with conservation easements before passing on.

The American Indians who peopled this land were known, among other names, as Abenaki, the dawn people. Now, as the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico illustrates, we must all be dawn people.

We are in the dawn of an era where alternative sources of energy will have to replace fossil fuels, and forests and fields will have to be protected, because if that doesn't happen, the New England coming generations experience will be a much-diminished place.

– Concord Monitor

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