

## Student Reflection

### Katie Michels

*Katie Michels works for the High Meadows Fund, a Vermont-based foundation that supports work in the areas of resilient land use, farm and forest enterprises, and energy. She graduated from Middlebury College in February, 2015, with degrees in Geography and Environmental Studies. In August 2017, Katie will start a new job with the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board.*



Parallel to the course of the Lincoln Summer Institute, my 2-year position at the High Meadows Fund wrapped up. I welcomed the Summer Institute not only for its content and the community we developed, but also because its lessons and exercises offered me an opportunity to reflect on and refine where I wanted to go next. I had a broad idea of where I wanted to land: I was hungry for an opportunity to engage with private landowners to help them protect and steward their land. During the Summer Institute, we each developed a personal narrative. This verbal exploration of who we are and how our stories have been influenced by the landscapes in which we have lived and worked helped me articulate a few concepts that I know will influence my career.

*I am motivated by values.* I am motivated to understand and protect the values that I and others attach to place. Recreation, contemplation, wildness, science, and food have each helped me connect to the landscapes I have lived in. And, *I very much want to understand the individual relationships others have developed with their places.* The challenges, the stories, the special spots. I have been struck by the layers of attachment to a place and community that have motivated individual land conservation projects. These layers aren't predictable, and I love that. In the spring of 2014, I interviewed stakeholders associated with the Bread Loaf conservation project to understand why Bread Loaf matters to them. This project helped me understand that the reasons why a place matters to an individual might have nothing to do with their career or degree. An ecologist told me how excited she was to play a role in preserving Robert Frost's literary legacy on the landscape, a project manager celebrated the history of the sawmill that was used to cut the logs for the Bread Loaf Inn one hundred years ago, and a poet described the imaginative space that Bread Loaf's forest vistas offer. I need to be careful to ask questions without assumptions in order to understand why an individual cares about a place. I look forward to continuing to listen to these stories.

*I appreciate working within a broader context.* This is why I like hiking so much... because as much as I enjoy each step and conversation along a trail, my favorite part of a hike is getting to a scenic vista, where I can look out over where I am, and remember how I got there. In our first Summer Institute session, we went for a hike up Mount Tully. From the top, we looked out over privately- and publicly-owned land, much of which was protected by the Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust as part of the North Quabbin Regional Conservation Partnership. Understanding how each individual parcel fit into a larger landscape conservation initiative gave me a greater appreciation for the place. In a similar vein, I appreciated learning about the Wildlands and Woodlands vision from David Foster, because it helped illustrate how individual conservation projects across multiple states can support far larger, regional

forestland conservation goals. Working on an individual part within a broader system and purpose is exciting to me.

*I want to not just understand how to protect land, but also how to steward protected land.* High Meadows has helped me appreciate the important role that for-profit businesses play in land protection and stewardship. Growing vegetables, tapping trees for syrup, raising cows, and harvesting wood are each ways that Vermonters connect to and take care of this place. Without a forest products or local food economy to incentivize responsible land management, the Vermont landscape would grow more houses than apples. High Meadows has helped me recognize that both for-profit and not-for-profit enterprises play a central role in land protection and stewardship.

Towards the end of the summer, I was offered a job working for the Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program at the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. I very happily accepted. The Viability Program provides business coaching, technical assistance, and grants to Vermont-based farm and



forests. I believe that, through this position, I can learn what it means to steward land *and* livelihoods. This position will offer me an opportunity to understand what it takes to run a viable, responsible working lands enterprise, and the factors that influence business owners, farmers, and foresters' relationships to their land.

Without the Summer Institute, I am not sure that I would have had the space or inspiration to articulate these ideas as clearly. The Summer Institute helped me articulate not only the fact that I care about land, but also the reasons *why* I care about land. I look forward to a career in land conservation and land stewardship, and I thank the Lincoln Institute, Jim, Marianne, Isabella, Jivan, and each of our guests for providing the inspiration and questions to help us each articulate why and how we will make our way in this important field.