

NEW ENGLAND NATURAL RESOURCES CENTER

A Brief History

The New England Natural Resources Center, a qualified 501(c)(3) organization, was founded in 1970 as an initiative of the national Conservation Foundation and cooperating state natural resources organizations. Created in the combative, early days of the modern environmental movement, its purpose was to build credible bridges between business, government, and the citizen environmental movement and to serve as a stimulus to actions across state borders.

The trustees (at least one per state) are prominent public and private leaders. To remain even-handed, the Center has deliberately not become a membership organization. It has also elected to engage in a substantial measure of risk-taking, using its regional connections, its flexible structure, and its balanced form of governance to undertake innovative studies and actions, both independently and upon the request of others.

For example, shortly after its founding, the Center was commissioned by the New England Regional Commission to stimulate surveys of natural areas in each of the New England states. These have since become formal state and regional natural heritage programs. On its own initiative, it examined the feasibility of an east-west highway through northern New England. As energy problems arose, the Center was asked to provide citizen inputs into the siting of pumped storage electric generating facilities in southern New England. A survey of New England's forest resources led to the coining of the current term, "Yankee Forest", to describe the region's working forest tradition and dominant pattern of small, private ownerships.

Upon the demise of New England's two federal/state regional institutions in 1984, the Center sponsored a thoughtful assessment of the region's future needs and directions for natural resources and environment. And its seminal policy paper in 1987 on the changes taking place in large industrial forest ownerships provided the spark for studies of the Northern Forest, the subsequent creation of the Northern Forest Lands Council, and the founding of the Northern Forest Center.

The Center's convening capacities have been employed on a number of occasions. Environmental "assemblies" were used to examine such issues as water supply and pollution control, wetlands restoration, land conservation, bioregionalism, and partnerships between academia and government. An additional assembly, called to draw attention to the newly-authorized Silvio Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in the Connecticut Valley, stimulated the choice of a plan that would engage state and local interests, rather than just the federal government, in its implementation. An assembly convened at Harvard's Kennedy School in January of 1996 directed attention to the prospects for environmental regionalism in New England.

With respect to experimentation, the Center has created two, wholly-owned subsidiaries - the *New England Environmental Mediation Center*, and the *Fund for New England* - operating each for a period of five years before closing them down. The mediation center's efforts to promote environmental conflict resolution in the six state region led, in one instance (Massachusetts), to the creation of a permanent state Office of Dispute Resolution, one of the first in the country. The philanthropic Fund for New England, employing the use of settlement funds from pollution cases and private contributions from 1000 Friends of New England, distributed some \$300,000 in grant funds to support grass-roots, environmental projects within the region. It also stimulated the formation of two permanent environmental trust operations based on settlements, the *Saugus River Watershed Council* and the *Massachusetts Environmental Trust*.

A third experiment, the *New England Environmental Policy Center* (NEEPC) began as a project of the NENRC in 1995 but was spun off in 1997 as an independent 501(c)(3) organization. Using some \$400,000 in national and regional grants, the NEEPC undertook an examination of potential dioxin contamination of milk and other dairy products occurring on New England farms. It also encouraged forest stewardship through the use of "green" forest certification processes.

A number of current projects carry on the Center's thirty-five year tradition of regional environmental leadership and service.

In July of 2001, the NENRC turned its attention to the New England portion of the renowned Appalachian National Scenic Trail, engaging

Elizabeth Kilmarx to design a volunteer environmental monitoring initiative (ATEMI) that ripened in 2007 into an Appalachian Trail Conservancy and National Park Service-led A.T. Mega-Transect environmental monitoring project covering the entire Trail corridor.

During the summer of 2002, with proposals under consideration for a new national forest in southwestern New England, the NENRC received a \$15,000 research grant from the Forest Service to examine the status of forest conservation and stewardship in Massachusetts. Members of the research team at the Harvard Forest continued on to propose a woodlands/wildlands (W+W) initiative guided by local woodland councils, a concept that envisioned half of the entire forest of Massachusetts secured by conservation easements over twenty years at an estimated cost of \$1 billion. Since 2005, using some \$100,000 in donated, private funds, the NENRC has been testing out the feasibility of the approach in practice. The results seem promising.

And in 2005, the NENRC returned to a concept first broached a decade earlier – the need for a history of conservation in New England. With personal participation committed to by senior conservation leaders in each of the states, and a \$10,000 challenge grant from the National Park Service matched twice by three foundations, an account of twentieth century land conservation in New England has been prepared and is now being readied for publication. In historic fashion, a highlight of this project was the assembly of selected New England conservationists in November of 2007 to critique and validate the scope and content of the draft manuscript.

In summary, after more than three decades of proven leadership and accomplishment, in its present role as a unique “holding company” and risk-taking innovator, the New England Natural Resources Center remains available for future service within New England as new needs and challenges arise.

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