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# Paul Doscher: New Hampshire everlasting

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Ask yourself: "If my taxes were exactly the same, I had a job that paid the same, the cost of living were the same, the schools and health care were equal, would I choose to live in New Jersey, Nebraska or New Hampshire?"

For most of us, the answer is obvious. We are here in New Hampshire because we want to be here.

We frequently read about various reports and studies that rank states by their "livability" or quality of life, and other rankings that compare living in the Granite State to every other state. Usually, we come out looking pretty good. Sure there are challenges that need to be clearly faced and addressed, but most of us strongly prefer to live here as compared to most other places.

I recall a recent conversation with my adult son about why he still lives in Dover, when in his business (sports and outdoor photography) he could conveniently live almost anywhere in America. I don't recall the exact details, but his reasons had a lot to do with the great access we have here to mountains, rivers, ocean and open spaces. Lots of places to enjoy the outdoors. I recall that some 45 years ago, I decided to come back to New Hampshire after college and graduate school in Ohio for pretty much the same reason.

The natural landscape, the background for everything we do and the source of our daily sustenance, is pretty healthy here.

Just over one-third of our land is in one or another state of permanent conservation.

Most of us likely don't take note on a daily basis that our forests are mostly productive and healthy, our streams run mostly clean, clear and cold, our vistas are mostly unmarred, our drinking water is mostly uncontaminated, and our wildlife is diverse and abundant. Conservation land (as well as other thoughtfully managed private land) make this possible.

Sure, there is much credit owed to laws, regulations and policies that have protected these fundamental natural resources. But in recent years, private land trusts, some 50 of them ranging from the statewide Forest Society and Natural Conservancy to the local trusts like

Fiver Rivers Conservancy and Piscataquog Land Conservancy have been diligently working with private landowners to protect the best farms, forests, rivers, wetlands and special places that define New Hampshire.

The lands they have protected amount to more than 400,000 acres or about 21 percent of the conservation lands in the state. (The rest is primarily public lands, owned by federal, state and local government.) Most of these lands still remain in the ownership of private landowners, and provide forest products, food, recreation, scenic views, etc. Most often it is open to public use for hiking, hunting, fishing and other outdoor pursuits, because of the generosity of the landowners. We see these properties every day, often without realizing they are permanently protected from development by a partnership between the landowner and a land trust.

Some have asked, "How much conservation land is enough?" The answer depends on what kind of place we want to live in. Certainly, not all land should be conserved, as there is a very legitimate need for places for housing, commerce and industry. Fortunately, land trusts and conservation agencies know this and have used 21st-century science and technology to study the landscape and prioritize the places that are important to protect in order to ensure the long-term integrity of the landscape and the environment. The maps they produce (for example the Wildlife Action Plan of N.H. Fish and Game) are available to anyone to use, and when studied carefully show that there is more than enough land that is not of highest ecological or natural resource value for plenty of development and other uses.

Yes, more needs protection. We know from scientific studies, for example, that we need to protect more land surrounding our public drinking water supplies. Less than 15 percent of the land critical to ensuring clean water is secure from inappropriate development.

I recall reading the results of a UNH opinion poll a few years back when the Legislature was debating the funding of our Land and Community Heritage Investment Program. In that 2012 survey of likely New Hampshire voters, nearly all (97 percent) agreed that we must invest in land conservation to protect New Hampshire's quality of life for future generations. The poll results showed almost no difference between political affiliations. Yes, conservation appears to be one of the places where we still share common values.

For many years I worked for the Forest Society and part of my job was working with landowners to conserve forest, farm and wildlands of importance. I was involved in hundreds of projects with landowners who were looking to secure the permanent conservation of their lands, They were people of every political persuasion. It mattered not whether they were Democrats, Republicans or neither, because every one shared some version of a "land ethic" and were motivated by a love of the land they had carefully stewarded, often as the latest in a long list of generations.

Of course, that conservation ethic is not unique to New Hampshire. Nationwide we, the citizens of this great country, own 618 million acres of public lands. They are used for a myriad of purposes, from wilderness to resource extraction. Most of those lands are the legacy of our nation's earlier history and were set aside by far-sighted leaders who knew that when we grew to be a much larger nation, those lands would be critical to our quality of life. These lands are cherished by the vast majority of Americans.

In recent years, citizens themselves working together as land trusts, have built on this foundation, and by 2016 those land trusts had protected more than 56 million acres, much of it still private hands. That's an area nearly 10 times the size of New Hampshire.

So, despite the daily discouraging environmental news from the nation's capital, there is reason to be optimistic and thankful. In their hearts, most of New Hampshire's and America's people care about this natural world on which we depend, and to their credit, thousands of them have ensured that future generations will have the opportunity to benefit from and enjoy what we have.

Even if you don't have a parcel of land worthy of conservation, you can participate in this most worthy and uplifting work. Join your local land trust and you will be making a contribution to what Robert Frost called "New Hampshire Everlasting": keeping our state the place we all want to live and hand down to future generations. To find your local land trust, go to the N.H. Land Trust Coalition website at [NHLTC.org](http://NHLTC.org) (NHLTC.org).

(Paul Doscher lives in Weare.)

