

Dec 29 2021

VTDigger

<https://www.vtdigger.org>

Leibowitz & Kritkauský: Climate plan is an opportunity to rewild Vermont and ourselves

This commentary is by Jon Leibowitz of Middlesex, executive director of Northeast Wilderness Trust, and Randy Kritkauský of Whiting, an enrolled tribal member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and a founder of ECOLOGIA, an international environmental organization.

Vermont's recently released Climate Action Plan contains recommendations that, if implemented, will lead to a wilder, more resilient Vermont. This will benefit us and the natural world on which we rely.

Allowing nature the time she needs to heal and flourish, and forests to grow old — also called rewilding — is rarely a priority for elected officials. So when this happens, we need to seize the moment!

Vermonters have long cherished the Northern Forest in which we live, but for far too long the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on managing it as a resource. This is true for all land, whether private, state or federal. Just 3 percent of Vermont is protected as wild. We can, and must, do better.

Make no mistake: A thriving future requires both the continued conservation and wise use of woodlands, but it also requires substantially more wildlands. Allowing lands to rewild simultaneously conserves biodiversity, stores and sequesters immense amounts of carbon, and provides quiet solace for those who seek it.

More wilderness will also demand that we get smarter about using limited timber resources — something we must do anyway.

The Climate Action Plan includes recommended actions such as: 1) Amending current use to be inclusive of wildlands and creating tax equity among landowners who prefer not to manage their land for timber; and 2) Policy changes, conservation action, and funding mechanisms to meet the old forest goals set forth in Vermont Conservation Design.

These consequential actions will bring balance between wildlands and woodlands in Vermont and help rewild significant portions of the Green Mountain State. Allowing wild forests to be part of current use and meeting the old forest goals of Vermont Conservation Design will likewise lead toward a much-needed paradigm shift in our relationship with the landscape.

Though important, legal changes alone are not enough. Addressing the ecological crises of our time requires a wholesale reimagining of our relationship with other-than-human beings. We must embrace our place as one of many species, and redevelop a familial relationship with Mother Earth and all of her wonderful manifestations. This is not a new concept, of course. It is as old as human habitation in Vermont.

Before European colonization, this land, known as N'dakinna to the Abenaki, was a peopled wilderness. Ancient and complex forests that we now label as "old growth" dominated the landscape. The original human inhabitants of N'dakinna lived rich and durable lives for millennia with little negative impact to biodiversity. Land was free to express itself and natural processes guided the ebb and flow of life.

This is a history we must honor. It is, however, critical to recognize that it is not the world we inhabit today. Biodiversity is collapsing in real time, old-growth forests make up less 1 percent of the Northeast today, and a region that was once home to approximately 150,000 people is now home to 34 million.

While wilderness is a recent concept in the long history of indigenous presence in the Northeast, so too is industrialization, urbanization, and the rapid loss of natural areas and ecological function. Wilderness as a legal designation didn't need to exist 400 years ago, but it does today. Wild landscapes offer people a place to recognize humanity's role within the whole community of life and likewise offer a place to practice humility, respect and restraint in reciprocity with nature. These are not new ideas, though they are largely forgotten by the dominant culture today.

Thus again, without explicitly stating so, the Climate Action Plan can help Vermont take a tangible step toward recognizing and honoring the wisdom of this land's original inhabitants. Taking the reciprocal step to rewild the landscape honors the ageless idea that Mother Earth will provide for us if we allow her and the beings who inhabit the land to thrive, and to heal one another when disruptions occur.

We can all learn this and see the benefits of such a humble approach if we take time to be in wild places, and if we listen carefully while we are there. To do that, we need undisturbed and quiet places where we can be fully present to the whispers of the birds, the brooks, and even the forest herself.

Can a single piece of legislation do all the above? Indeed, the Global Warming Solutions Act offers such a road map. Implementing the wild forest goals within the Climate Action Plan is a critical step that Vermont can take to honor its Indigenous people, provide a rich future for all Vermonters, and create room for the other-than-human to thrive alongside us.

There is ample reason to be pessimistic about our future. However, we choose to be optimistic, firmly rooted in beauty and wildness.

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