

# THE WOODSTOCK FOUNDATION, INC.

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*Founded by Mary French & Laurance Spelman Rockefeller*

*In July of 2004 the following guest editorial was published in the Burlington Free Press as well as a number of other Vermont newspapers, including Woodstock's Vermont Standard. It also appeared on the Internet, and remains on the web site of the Preservation Trust of Vermont. It was the philosophical precursor of the Governor's Summit on the Vermont Destination, held in Woodstock a year later <http://216.92.252.234/assets/pdf/govsum.pdf>.*

## **PROTECTING VERMONT'S INTEGRITY**

Earlier this spring, the National Geographic Society ranked Vermont 11<sup>th</sup> on a list of the 115 highest quality destinations in the world. Several weeks later, the National Trust for Historic Preservation identified Vermont as one of the most endangered historic places in America. On the surface, the coincidence of these designations may seem ironic, but digging deeper, they offer insights into how Vermont has come to be the special place we cherish, and they lay the seedbed for a strategy whereby Vermont can sustain itself and thrive in the coming decades.

Vermonters have begun to understand the double-edged challenge we face— that our state is supremely attractive and perilously fragile. Vermont earned National Geographic's Destination Stewardship recognition for the quality and integrity of its natural, cultural, historic, and aesthetic attributes. The high ranking suggests that, so far, Vermonters are doing a good job of protecting these assets in the face of significant challenges.

At the same time, Vermont's economic challenges offer ongoing threats to its quality and integrity both as a place to live and as a destination. Although the National Trust focused its concern on the proliferation of Wal-Mart, the relationships between preservation and economic development are much more complex. Vermont's broad agricultural base remains in economic decline, and with it the distinctive character of the Vermont farm landscape is steadily vanishing. Vermont's industrial base, which was never robust, is shaky at best. Vermonters look to the future and rightly ask, "How do we develop our economy and create jobs, in ways that preserve the character of this place?"

There are signs of hope. The creative sector shows vitality as an increasingly energetic mainstay of the Vermont economy. Vermont brand identity has gained enviable national and international reach, helping environmentally friendly niche producers to thrive. And now, National Geographic's Destination Stewardship designation affirms the quality and, it is hoped, the sustainability, of Vermont as a vibrant place for residents and visitors alike. How can these elements of creativity, brand, and destination be galvanized into a strategy that will provide a strengthened economic future while avoiding the kinds of growth that threaten the quality and character of Vermont?

Part of the answer lies in protection of Vermont's natural, historic, and cultural assets, but a key to economic sustainability lies beyond simple protection. Through the appropriate and sensitive application of these assets Vermont can enhance its effectiveness as a destination. Vermonters have the opportunity to shape the destination economy of their state, developing it into a sustainable and sustaining economic engine.

Vermont ranked as high as it did in the National Geographic Destination Poll both because of the quality of its attributes and because of the effectiveness of its stewardship. The poll critically evaluated destinations around the globe according to six criteria, including environmental and ecological quality, social and cultural integrity, and "condition of built heritage" – that is, historic places, archeology, and current structures. The poll also considered the nature of tourism in each destination, assessing to what degree tourism development is of "appropriate character" to the place.

Vermont is not a theme park. Vermont is a real place, with a distinctive cultural character and a working landscape that is both beautiful and in transition. Its farm countryside is a national icon – a "home" for which the nation longs. Shaped largely by an agricultural economy, Vermont's working countryside, its rural culture, and its compact villages are among its most attractive attributes, for visitors as well as for residents.

While Vermonters are justifiably wary of "Commodified tourism," environmentally sensitive cultural heritage tourism can and should be cultivated in Vermont. Vermont is a place for personal discovery. It begs for slower-paced, smaller-scaled, respectful exploration. Visitors need help and encouragement to discover this Vermont. If we can help them to do this successfully, we can further the stewardship of Vermont while we build the tourism base of our economy. We can take as our models the few destinations that outranked Vermont on the National Geographic list – places like Cape Breton, the Norwegian fjords, and Tuscany – that have long looked to their cultural heritage for insight into what appropriate tourism can be.

With our state simultaneously listed as a world class destination and as a highly endangered place, Vermonters should pause to reflect on its character and its future. The time is right for an exploration of how Vermont's essential attributes work together, how they are cared for, and how they may help to shape our economic future. Through a combination of thoughtful stewardship and careful development, we can secure for our children a Vermont that is both a real place that they can cherish and a sustaining place in which they can make their futures.

*David A. Donath is President of the Woodstock Foundation, a public non-profit institution founded by Laurance S. and Mary F. Rockefeller that promotes conservation, sustainable land use, and heritage as values that are essential to culture, community, and the human spirit. The Foundation operates the Billings Farm & Museum an operating dairy farm dedicated to telling the story of Vermont's rural heritage. [http://www.billingsfarm.org/woodstock\\_foundation/index.html](http://www.billingsfarm.org/woodstock_foundation/index.html). He lives in Pomfret.*