

THE WOODSTOCK FOUNDATION, INC.

Founded by Mary French & Laurance Spelman Rockefeller

In November and December of 2010 the following guest editorial was published in the major daily newspapers throughout Vermont, including the Burlington Free Press, the Rutland Herald, the Montpelier Times-Argus, the Valley News, the Bennington Banner, the Brattleboro Reformer, as well as in numerous weekly newspapers, including Woodstock's Vermont Standard. It also appeared on a number of Internet blogs. The piece anticipated the Vermont Council on Rural Development's Summit on the Future of Vermont's Working Landscape, held at the Statehouse on December 10, 2010.

OUR WORKING LANDSCAPE AND OUR FUTURE

In the hearts of most Vermonters, our state is first among the great places in America. Vermont is also a great, unspoiled place in the imaginations of its visitors, and in the minds of many thoughtful people around the country and the world. This identity or “brand” is the basis of Vermont’s outstanding quality of life, and it drives much of our economy, including agriculture and food products, real estate and construction, and tourism.

In 2009 the National Geographic Society ranked Vermont 5th among the unspoiled great destinations on the planet – better than anywhere else in the United States. This followed a 7th place ranking in 2004, when Vermont also scored first in the U.S. National Geographic’s panel of 437 experts in historic preservation, geography, sustainable tourism, local culture, environment, and related fields evaluated notable places all around the world. They judged according to six criteria: environmental quality, social and cultural integrity, condition of historic places, aesthetic appeal, quality of tourism management, and outlook for the future.

This is very good news, and we who live here know that Vermont is much more than a pretty place. It is a distinctive culture based on a way of living that is close to the land and to neighbors and communities. It is rooted in Vermont’s working landscape, its countryside of farms, forests, and compact villages. This is the place that bore and nurtured us or that we chose to be our home. It is the place that we aspire to pass on to our children and our grandchildren.

Vermont’s working landscape shapes and defines us, just as we continually shape and redefine it. Although we sometimes may think that our countryside is unchanging, and wish it would stay as it is forever, it is ever evolving. We cannot take it for granted. Today, in the wake of decades of farm crises and the recent recession, Vermont is a troubled landscape, with challenges that endanger all that we value.

Those living on and working the land have shaped the countryside that we call home, with its tapestry of farm fields, forests, villages, and towns. During the past century, dairy farming and forestry shaped this working landscape. However, economic downturns are insidiously unraveling the threads that bind our rural countryside. Failed farms turn to puckerbrush and untended forests grow tangled and unhealthy. Sprawling development disrupts the pattern of farms and compact villages, while big-box retailing sucks the economic lifeblood out of our towns. Left untended, our special place begins to look like everyplace and no-place.

Vermont's distinctive countryside is bound up with great opportunities and great challenges. This is nothing new. Since the founding of the state in the 1700s, Vermont's working landscape has endured a succession of prosperity, reversals, and crises. The very beauty and resilience of our state is a result of Vermonters' continuing struggle to make a living in a challenging environment. In many ways, the land shapes our culture and our identity.

Our shared history, in our communities and on the land, forms the core of Vermont's distinctive character. This place that Vermonters and visitors cherish is rooted in our farms and forests, our vibrant communities of villages and small cities, our commitment to a clean environment, and our traditions of freedom and unity. These fundamental elements of attractiveness, economic health, vitality, and sustainability define Vermont's identity as a place that offers "a profound sense of well being" for all who experience it.

These are irreplaceable assets upon which the future of Vermont must be built. Our state offers a model for growth where conservation, innovation, and "green" ethics combine with civic engagement to define a sustainable society. Our ideals of historic preservation and heritage resonate with the enduring character of our communities, enterprises, and people – evident in the things we build, the institutions we establish, and how we choose to steer development.

Vermont's supreme beauty holds both opportunities and threats. During the recent economic downturn, the slim resources that we once brought to bear on stewardship have been stretched to the breaking point. As recovery takes hold, pressure for unwise development will again put stress on the distinctive elements of state's character. These forces threaten the heritage of our communities, just as the powerful forces of milk prices and sprawl threaten our agricultural landscape. They threaten the distinctiveness that makes Vermont the place where we want to live, work, and raise our families. They threaten the countryside that attracts consumers and visitors who purchase our products and enjoy our destinations – and with it our economic wellbeing.

Our opportunities are equally great. In 2009, citizens articulated a vision for the future of Vermont, organized through the Council on Rural Development. Soon after, the Governor convened a panel to tackle the challenge of safeguarding the state's heritage and historic resources. At the same time, the Agriculture Secretary convened leaders from business and industry, tourism and preservation, and education, as well as farmers and food producers, to grapple with the severe challenges to our agricultural economy. A common thread ran through these discussions as participants came to understand that the integrity of Vermont's working countryside is at the core of all that we value and hope to become.

Now it is time to move from discussion to action. On Friday, December 10, the Rural Development Council will convene a Summit on the Future of Vermont's Working Landscape at the Statehouse – encouraging citizens and leaders to come together to outline the critical steps to securing those things that make Vermont our enduring home.

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. He lives in Pomfret.