

7/5/99

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Population Sprawl: The View from Vermont

For the last several weeks I have been living in central Vermont, teaching some summer school classes. Although my afternoons are spent in the classroom, I have my mornings free to wander the Vermont woods on my mountain bike and then pedal furiously on the highways to get back in time to teach.

Both the human and natural landscapes are so different here than in Montana that it is hard not to be puzzling over the contrasts.

When Europeans first began to settle in Vermont, 95 percent of the state was forested. The colonists quickly set out to change that, clearing the forested hills and valleys to lay out their farms. Some of the logs that were cut to create pastures and croplands were floated down the rivers to be converted into boards. But in the hills, it was far too expensive to transport the logs that were a dime a dozen. Instead the logs were simply burned with the ash sometimes converted into something of more concentrated value, potash, to be used elsewhere as fertilizer or in the production of soap, glass, and the processing of wool. As the population of the northeast grew in the 19th century, more serious commercial logging could take place to support the burgeoning new nation. By 1880, over 60 percent of Vermont's forested lands had been cleared.

But Vermont's farming days were limited. The thin, glacial soils of its rolling hills could not compete with the richer soils on farms to the west in Ohio and the other Great Lakes states. Vermont farmers struggled to find a niche in American farming abandoning crops for livestock operations, sheep raising, and then dairy farms. But farming was slowly abandoned during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And the forests marched in again.

Since 1880, the forested lands in Vermont have more than doubled. Now over 80 percent of the original forest cover is back, in a greatly modified way. Gone, of course, are almost all of the old growth forests. Gone also are most of the larger mammals, both carnivores and herbivores.

This reforestation, however, has not changed the pattern of human settlement all that much. Vermonters did not abandon the land and flood into a few large urban areas. Instead, they have continued to live on the old farmsteads, even

as the forests have slowly enclosed them. The towns, with the exception of the commercial and political hubs to the north, have remained tiny, even by Montana standards. The hundreds of small scattered towns remain primarily crossroads providing scattered commercial services. Meanwhile the population continues to live sprawled out over the forested and farm landscape.

The "sprawl," however, does not closely resemble the suburban sprawl that we in Montana spend a lot of time worrying about. It is truly an ex-urban, rural pattern with considerable distances between homes, substantial forests and fields separating neighbors. Vermonters seem to space themselves apart by about the distance that a loud call can be heard.

It is this uniformly scattered settlement across the land and small urban nodes that has come to typify the "traditional" Vermont landscape. And it is that pattern that the population seeks to protect through land-use planning. Both strip mall development and suburban subdivision are opposed. So are bulging urban areas.

These historical and cultural differences are somewhat disorienting to someone who has spent most of his adult life immersed in Montana land-use controversies. In Montana, expanding human settlement is seen as a threat to farming and ranching. Here, it coincides nicely. In Montana, we have focused on trying to encourage more density in our cities and less settlement outside of those cities. In Vermont a totally different rural-urban pattern was set a hundred years ago. In Montana, we concentrate our commercial businesses in ever expanding rings around a few large urban areas. In Vermont those commercial businesses sit apart, snuggled into the hillsides just the way peoples' homes do, scattered loosely across the landscape.

Of course there are practical reasons for some of the differences between Montana and Vermont. In Vermont at the beginning of the 20th century, there was almost no federal land; almost the entire state was privately owned. In Western Montana, it is only the river bottoms and foothills that are privately owned and potential home and farm sites. We are hemmed in by much rougher terrain and federal ownership. We cannot really sprawl out over the landscape; we can only sprawl along those river bottoms.

In addition, Montana was settled by Europeans nearly a hundred years later than Vermont. We have not had the time to strip the landscape for commercial use, find that to be an economic mistake, and then begin to let the land heal itself while we continue to inhabit it.

What is clear from the Vermont experience is that there is more than one type of landscape and settlement pattern that is attractive to people. There are also a variety of semi-wild, semi-natural landscapes that can be created. Finally, it is not

at all clear that agriculture is needed to protect, in some sense, the landscape. Human settlement, instead, has the potential to do less damage to natural systems than agriculture does, if the settlement pattern is right.