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Sportsmen vs. the Northern Forest

It seems you can fool most of the people...

By Ted Williams

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Thinking sportsmen in the region were ecstatic. In December 1998 forest-products giant Champion International, having cut the guts out of 296,000 acres of what it aptly called "industrial forest" in northern New York, Vermont and New Hampshire, unloaded it to the public for \$76.2 million. The deal--set up by The Conservation Fund, based in Arlington, Virginia, state and federal agencies and the sporting and environmental communities, showed what advocates of wildness can do when sufficiently frightened. It was a monumental coup for fish and wildlife. An opportunity like it may never come again; and part of the reason it may never come again is that thinking sportsmen are outnumbered by sportsmen who believe everything they heard from the last person who spoke to them.

The man who made this fabulous land purchase possible was developer Claude Rancourt, a.k.a. New Hampshire's "Trailer Park King." Ten years earlier he had scared the bejesus out of even the most environmentally insensitive citizens and politicians by acquiring options on 92,000 acres in Vermont and New Hampshire, including the beautiful and pristine Nash Stream watershed north of the White Mountain National Forest. Everyone had assumed that this land--owned by Diamond Occidental, another forest-products giant--was safe from the tacky development in which Rancourt specialized. But Diamond had fallen into the clutches of British corporate raider James Goldsmith, who had dissolved the company and was hawking its holdings. Easterners had learned to live with clearcuts. Hideous as they are, they eventually heal. Not so with trailer parks. With sportsmen and environmentalists screaming into the faces of their legislators, the US Forest Service and the State of New Hampshire purchased 46,000 acres from Rancourt, leaving him with a 25-percent profit and gravel-mining rights along Nash Stream.

The Champion lands deal was better executed, but an emergency action also. Management plans could come later. In 1998 the land had to be saved from what the forest-products industry seriously calls "higher and better use" (HBU), i.e., commercial development. Remote trout water is a magnet for HBU. Suddenly, the yodeling of loons and the caroling of hermit thrushes are replaced by the bleating of boom boxes and the howling of ATVs. Wild trout vanish. The woods remain, but they are spiritless. It's the saddest death I know.

In the East the moniker "northern forest" refers to a specific biome--the 26 million acres draped across the shoulders of Yankeeland from Machias, Maine to Syracuse, New York. It's a zone of contrast and transition, rugged and delicate, where temperate hardwoods mingle with boreal conifers, where bobcats prowl with tabbies, and eagles pick off Peking ducks, where moose, at the southern fringe of their range, winter on north-facing slopes while, in valleys lit by the slouching sun, starving whitetails huddle under black growth at the northern fringe of their range. What makes the northern forest even more special for angler/naturalists is that it is America's last best refuge for large, inland brook trout. Our gaudy Yankee char--the "dweller of springs"--is an old-growth species, dependent on the shade of thick forest canopies. You cannot manage for it without also managing for thousands of other old-growth species from pine martens to spruce grouse to liverworts; and you manage for these organisms best by leaving their woods alone. That doesn't happen much in the Northeast.

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In Vermont 133,000 acres of the Champion lands were protected from HBU development at a cost of \$26.5 million through a joint investment by Essex Timber Company, the Freeman Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Vermont and small private donors. Of that \$26.5 million, the state chipped in only \$4.5 million, this for a public-access and sustainable-forestry easement on Essex Timber's 84,000 acres. A 22,000-acre Wildlife Management Area around West Mountain—containing an ecological reserve or "core area" that sustains wild brook trout and the rarest plants and animals in the state—was a gift to Vermonters from the Mellon Foundation and the federal government. The conservation easement, jointly held by The Nature Conservancy and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, guarantees use by anglers, hunters, trappers and even snowmobilers in the entire 22,000 acres, including the core area.

One of the deal's disappointments was that the precedent-setting easement on Essex Timber Company's 84,000 acres requires that the land be logged forever. Essex and all future owners will be in violation if they do not log. In the stump field that is northern Vermont the state had an opportunity to recover a rare and diverse ecosystem. Instead it elected to spin 84,000 acres back into industrial forestry. "It's absurd that we'd lock in an economic use that totally precludes alternatives," declares Tom Butler of the Wildlands Project. "It's as if a century ago a steam-engine factory was purchased with public funds on the condition that it produce steam engines for eternity. Now when I go to conferences I keep hearing the forest-products industry say: 'This is great. How can we get a forever-logging easement?'"

Another major disappointment was that the core area, where logging (but, again, not fishing, hunting, trapping or snowmobiling) would be prohibited, is only 12,500 acres. Wild brook trout simply cannot survive in industrial forests. Sometimes when I find myself in the northern forest I look for the flower-laced mountain rills where, in the distant days before beaver fever, I'd stoop to drink, scattering trout fry. In many of these places water and fish are gone now, dried up and crushed by giant forest mowers called "feller-bunchers." Another sad death.

The ecologists assigned to study the former Champion land had wanted a core area of at least 40,000 acres. One of them—Jeff Parsons of Sterling College in Craftsbury--explains: "Ecosystems are hit regularly by natural disturbances—microbursts, hurricanes, insects, disease, ice storms. . . . An ecological reserve needs to be bigger than the size of the average disturbance in the region (40,000 acres in this part of Vermont), otherwise there might not be adequate seed sources to regenerate the forest."

The West Mountain Wildlife Management Area is Vermont's only expression of true boreal forest. There are boreal trees such as black spruce and northern white cedar, boreal mammals such as rock voles, boreal birds such as gray jays, bay-breasted warblers and black-backed woodpeckers, boreal flowers such as bog aster and white-fringed orchid, boreal lichens, boreal sedges. Boreal bryophytes--mosses and liverworts—abound in unmatched diversity. Nowhere else in the state is there such a high concentration of bogs and fens. The area provided a reservoir of moose when they'd been extirpated everywhere else in the state. It is drained by "reference streams" so unpolluted the state uses them as a standard of what clean water should be. Remote ponds (rare in Vermont) provide refuge not just for brook trout but for lake-shore plant communities largely lost elsewhere. Ledges provide denning habitat for bobcats. Deer, severely winter stressed in northern Vermont, are limited by lack of thermal cover, not lack of browse. Before conifers reach a height where they can protect deer they're clearcut. What thinking hunter would want to perpetuate this cutting rotation?

I tracked down a thinking sportsman in Vermont—state Rep. David Deen (D-Westminster), the conservation conscience of the Vermont House, a leader in the fight to save the Champion lands from HBU and an Orvis-endorsed fly-fishing guide. Deen gets into the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area a good deal and knows its waters intimately. Paul Stream, partly in the core area, is a wild brook trout factory. "Every pool has a brookie in it," he told me. It's also one of the most productive nursery areas for Atlantic salmon fry in the entire Connecticut River watershed. But perhaps the most important function of this and other core-area brook trout streams is the icy, oxygenated water they pump into the Connecticut, providing summer refuge for the biggest trout in the region.

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A decade ago Paul Stream lay in ruins, choked with silt bleeding from Champion roads and clearcuts. "Walking in places I used to fish was like slogging around in quicksand," Deen recalls. "It was an absolute disaster. Champion got up there with their chippers and took everything. There was nothing left to cut." But now, after ten spring runoffs have scoured its bed, Paul Stream is almost completely back. What thinking angler would want to re-open the core area to industrial forestry?

Despite the glaring flaws of the 133,000-acre Champion lands rescue in Vermont, maybe it was the best deal for fish and wildlife that state politics would allow. There wasn't lots of time for tweaking and negotiating, and the framers deserve hearty ovation for pulling it off. Instead, they're getting beaten up by sportsmen for banning logging on the little 12,500-acre core area. And now sportsmen are campaigning to do away with this reserve.

It started with 74 camp owners in the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area who had leased land from Champion. Under Champion, the leases expired after five years, although they were usually renewed if the holders behaved. When the public took possession of the management area the camp owners knew they'd have to clear out, but in a fit of benevolence the state granted them occupancy for life plus 20 years. Lifetime leases are unheard of in public land acquisitions. In New York, for example, camp owners who had leased land from Champion have been allowed to remain on what's now public land for just 15 years; and that is more than generous. Still, the Vermont camp owners were not satisfied, and they demanded permanent leases. Governor Howard Dean and the legislature refused.

So at meetings of the Vermont Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs the camp owners proclaimed that The Nature Conservancy (TNC)—co-holder of the management area easement—had been taken over by anti-gun, anti-blood-sport, anti-Vermont flatlanders who had it in for the "traditional uses" of camp squatting, logging in the core area and ATV mud slinging on former Champion property (even though the state and Champion had long ago banned ATVs from all their lands). It was only a matter of time, pronounced the camp owners, before TNC did away with other traditional uses such as hunting, fishing and trapping, never mind that these uses had been guaranteed by the easement.

"There was this clause that said 'non-compatible uses' could be phased out of the core area," remarks avid hunter and angler Pat Berry, communications director of the Vermont Natural Resources Council. "The camp owners told sportsmen [untruthfully] that this meant hunting, fishing and trapping, and they believed it. So TNC said, 'Okay, fine,' and it took the clause out. Then the camp owners and the sportsmen they'd co-opted moved on to logging. This was 'a government land grab.' Hearings became crazy bullying sessions. I write a column for *Outdoors Magazine* on conservation issues. And some of the guys are waging an all-out war against me. I'm 'not a sportsman' because I want a no-logging zone. They're actively supporting the legislators who cast the most damaging votes against water quality and wildlife habitat simply because they opposed the core area."

This past legislative session sportsmen and their allies hatched unsuccessful bills that would have allowed logging in the core area, that would have mandated that logging is, by definition, consistent with preserving natural resources, and that would have deleted language from the enabling legislation that protects wildlife habitat and identifies natural heritage sites.

Whipping the sporting masses to a froth of hysteria and paranoia is *Outdoors Magazine* editor James Ehlers, a Music Man figure who stomps and shouts and carries on about secret, government-financed, anti-sportsman conspiracies right here in River City. He preaches to his flock that the core area is a preemptive strike on the working class by "egocentric Chittenden County elitists," "narrow-minded misanthropic state officials" and the unholy Pooh-Bahs of the "shape shifter" Fish and Wildlife Department. "No cutting of trees means no habitat for [game] animals, which means no hunting." The Nature Conservancy is a "Goliath" but sportsmen (under his leadership, of course) have brought it "to its knees after being ignored, excluded, patronized and prejudged." TNC is "saving the last great places on Earth for themselves." The Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife is staffed by

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"disgruntled, coerced scientists." The Montpelier-based environmental group Forest Watch is a bunch of "emotional Bobos." Governor Howard Dean keeps "an ever thoughtful eye towards a wealthy America and discriminating microbrew drinkers." In the core area sportsmen can: "Come and watch healthy trees grow old, fall over and die. Come and watch the deer look for browse that is too high for them to reach. Watch them leave and die. . . . Come and observe the underbrush wither and die because the large 'old growth' trees are blocking out the sunlight." "Biodiversity," warns Ehlers, "is the rallying cry of hell-bent preservationists everywhere. It is to the environmental community what rear-end revealing pants are to high-school kids today. . . . The tweed academia even have a name for it—sacred ecology—and the Vermont Biodiversity Project zealots are on a crusade to control the social agenda, equating the constitutional rights of humans with the supposed rights of bugs." And so on and so on and so on.

"Why are you upset?" I asked Ehlers. "You can do anything you want in the core area."

"There won't be any management for game species," he responded.

"But doesn't game—brook trout, bobcats, deer and such—need old growth? Isn't restoring old growth management too?"

"It is if all the cards are on the table."

Well, no. It's management with or without cards, with or without tables. When I asked Ehlers to explain how ecological reserves conflict with the interests of sportsmen he e-mailed me a list of "Open Land Species Threatened by Uniform Climax Forest Management" that included superabundant organisms proliferating in suburbia and industrial forests. Among them: Joe Pye weed, blackberry, black-eyed Susan, chokecherry, mourning dove and robin. He is serious, and so are the Vermont sportsmen who follow him in lock-step. Prevent ecological reserves! Save the Joe Pye weed!

After reading Ehlers copious screeds and interviewing him for the better part of an hour, it became clear to me that of all the things for which he can be justly chided, failure to think is not among them. For example, he has figured out how to sell magazines, and he does it extremely well. Outdoors Magazine is now the most influential sportsmen's publication in Vermont, and it has just gone regional, seeking circulation in Maine, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Tom Butler makes this observation: "There are state legislators who honestly believe that if you don't log every acre all the time, all the animals will die, that the only way to healthy wildlife populations is to have intensive forest management everywhere, that nature can't do anything right. There's an element in Vermont that is grossly ecologically ill-informed, and I think James Ehlers is savvy enough to goose it along."

"Ehlers loves to portray himself as representing the downtrodden, someone who waves a flag for hunters and anglers who get pushed around by modern society," says Steve Wright, who directed the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife from 1985 to 1989 and now serves the National Wildlife Federation as its New England coordinator. "He's also a very ambitious businessman."

The stink raised by Ehlers attracted National Rifle Association (NRA) membership barkers who descended on Vermont like blowflies. "Dear Vermont NRA Member," read the January 29, 2002 missive. "As you know, the State of Vermont purchased the Champion lands, now known as the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area, for the purpose of preserving them for traditional uses, including hunting and trapping. Environmental activists are working hard to keep in place an easement that would allow them to close large areas of this parcel to these uses! THEY WILL TELL YOU OTHERWISE. DO NOT BELIEVE THEM. IF WE DON'T RESOLVE THIS MATTER NOW, WHAT WILL IT MEAN FOR HUNTERS, SHOOTERS, TRAPPERS, AND FISHERMEN? IT MEANS the environmental activists could, on a whim, end all of these activities on land that has been cherished by sportsmen for generation upon generation. IT MEANS you could be denied access to more than 20,000 acres paid for by your hard-earned tax dollars. THEY WILL TELL YOU WE SHOULD BE HAPPY BECAUSE THIS LAND WAS A GIFT. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU PAID \$4.5 MILLION FOR A GIFT?"

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Actually, the state did not "purchase the Champion lands." Vermonters didn't pay a cent for the "more than 20,000 acres." The management area was, as I reported earlier, given to the state by the Mellon Foundation and the federal government. And, even if environmentalists wanted to (which they don't), they couldn't close one acre to fishing, hunting and trapping because these uses are legally guaranteed in perpetuity. Such is the NRA's commitment to truth.

Also scenting membership opportunities was the Ruffed Grouse Society, an outfit that would cheerfully sacrifice whole watersheds of brook trout for an imagined chance to fill one more grouse with chilled eights. It feigned outrage that the tiny core area would be preserved from the scalping delivered most everywhere else in northern New England, and it tub-thumbed for a bill that would have done away with the ecological reserve or, as it chastely and deceitfully put it, "retain active timber management in the 'toolbox' of Fish and Wildlife managers for use on scientifically justified wildlife habitat enhancements."

Wise-Use types puffed up and trilled like toads in rainwater. The Property Rights Foundation of America proclaimed that "the long-range goal" of the entire campaign to save the northern forest is to "eliminate forestry and other human use." The Northeast Regional Forest Foundation declared that "there is nothing preventing The Nature Conservancy from transferring or selling this easement to another, even more radical organization in the future."

Jim Northup, director of Forest Watch, makes this observation: "If the most shy and sensitive creatures we share this planet with are to survive over the long term, we absolutely must establish some wild places for them. The areas of the national forests that have the least logging have the most pristine waters and the healthiest fisheries. In a densely populated region like the Northeast the future is certainly more roads and more houses and more people. Many sportsmen here travel thousands of miles for high-quality hunting and fishing opportunities. And we have some chances to create those opportunities right here in the Northeast. Those chances won't happen accidentally." Nor will they happen if sportsmen keep trying to torpedo them.

By the time you read this Vermont will have a new governor, a new lieutenant governor, a new House and a new Senate. Instructed by Ehlers, most sportsmen are backing candidates who have it in for ecological reserves. With help from these politicians the Vermont Traditions Coalition--comprised of the camp owners, the Vermont Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, clearcutters fronting as the Associated Industries of Vermont and the Vermont Forest Products Association, and property-rights groups--will have spawned (or will be preparing) legislation to get logging back into the core area. Even if they fail, they will have generated so much political heat that ecological reserves, desperately needed in the East and in all American forests, may no longer be politically feasible. And that's food for thought--or should be--for all sportsmen.