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Future of agriculture

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ENVIRONMENT

As Vermonters, do we want to live in a theme park - full of characters we've heard of but never met? Or would we rather engage, through agricultural activity, with our families, our neighbors, and our communities in meaningful ways? As chairman of Shoreham's Planning Commission in the 1990s, I signed off on a lot of letters of support for farmers who wanted to conserve their farms and sell their development rights. The "working landscape" was a prominent term used in those letters to evoke an image that conveyed the essence of Vermont.

Now I'm having second thoughts about whether that term actually means what we think it does. I'm falling out of love with the idea of the working landscape, and I'm replacing it with the notion of the "cultural landscape."

What's the distinction?

For me the working landscape has become a state of mind - something we think we like and intuitively want to support, but something that has become trivialized because we have little real relationship to it. We tend to observe it as we pass through it. As a result, it has taken on a certain theme-park quality.

The cultural landscape, on the other hand, is the working landscape plus the people and communities that support it. It is the "living" working landscape - a system defined by the relationship between social, economic, environmental and geographical factors.

The cultural landscape is rooted in our history and provides a context that will enrich our future - if we cultivate it. It represents the labor of those who once created it, as well as those who now maintain it. Understanding the cultural context of labor and land is essential to helping us plan for the future, since knowing how we got here will help us get to where we want to be.

The cultural landscape was not created by people passing through, and

it is not maintained by second-home owners. It was developed by folks who carved opportunity out of adversity, and it is sustained by people who are committed to keeping it real. And, like all systems, it is changing and adapting.

Vermont's traditional cultural landscape has several distinctive features. Relationships matter in this landscape, and there is a strong sense of succession - the awareness that there is something worth passing on to the next generation. The inherent limitations of this setting, properly understood and worked with, begin to define opportunities. Frugality and practicality are required. Living in Vermont's cultural landscape requires us to live within our means and to make do - or do without. Labor has value beyond simple economics, and there is a strong sense of personal accountability. What we do matters more than what we say, and we all share the responsibility to do right by each other. In this context, community interests and individual interests are not mutually exclusive. So we look after our own, but not at the expense of others.

Incidental knowledge has a fundamental role in Vermont's cultural landscape - the informal learning that comes from people in their place (such as a family member or a mentor), as opposed to technical knowledge, which is formal learning that is generally transmitted in off-site settings by an "expert."

Incidental knowledge is place-based, acquired in settings such as dinner table conversations, field walks, berry picking, or deer camp. It complements technical knowledge. It's what sets "native" Vermonters apart from "transplants," because it provides the transfer of intergenerational wisdom and perspective through stories.

Why does this matter? Incidental knowledge provides authenticity. Stories are shared accounts of personal experiences. As stories are passed on to others, the first-person experiences become second-hand knowledge, which are known as tales. Tales eventually become legends, and legends, in their turn, inevitably become myths. In this context, the cultural landscape is characterized by stories, while the working landscape is characterized by tales.

Understanding this will help us maintain the perception of Vermont (and Vermonters) as special, because recognizing the context that the cultural landscape provides enriches our understanding of what it means to be authentic. Metaphorically, the cultural landscape is the paper that the blueprint of our future is sketched upon.

What does all this have to do with the future of agriculture? Agriculture has played a unique and fundamental role in defining Vermont's cultural landscape - and our future is deeply rooted in that past.

Today, Vermont has three major assets in terms of sustainable economic development: its people, its image and its natural resources. Agriculture, as a component of our natural resource base, can enhance our people and our image through meaningful employment, good nutrition, and environmental quality. It gives Vermonters an opportunity to participate in and contribute to the cultural landscape that I've described. It can personalize the working landscape. No other sector can make such a claim.

Historically tourists come and pay to see the working landscape. Vermonters need to protect the cultural landscape by keeping it real and first-person.

I like to compare the Vermonters in our cultural landscape to one of our traditional agricultural crops - rhubarb. Both are:

Deep-rooted, resilient, practical.

In need of some attention, but not too much.

A little sour and not too flashy.

Regionally adapted.

Not for everyone.

Authentic.

Equal opportunists - take it or leave it.

Grounded in traditions that are being experimented with in non-traditional ways.

Here's the bottom line: As Vermonters, do we want to live in a theme park - full of characters we've heard of but never met? Or would we rather engage, through agricultural activity, with our families, our neighbors, and our communities in meaningful ways that will ensure the continuation of our story lines?

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