

The following chapters are the synthesis of public forum notes and interviews, statistical polling, written comments, trend line research, and the many other contributions from Vermonters described in the Introduction in Part One of *Imagining Vermont*. They reflect, to the best of the Council's ability, the essence of what Vermonters shared. The Council's purpose in these chapters is to reflect what we have gathered about important subjects, whether they are emotional, divisive or matter-of-fact. All of the information was organized into ten key issues areas: *Vermont Culture; Population; Natural Environment; Working Landscape: Agriculture and Forestry; Built Environment: Development and Land Use; Economy; Education; Human Services, Health, and Safety; Infrastructure; and Energy*.

While each chapter encompasses a wide range of research and discussion, a common framework is used. Quotes from Vermonters illustrate specific points or show a range of opinions, and research and polling provide balance to the individual voices, lending authority or illuminating contradictions in the ideas expressed. All references, unless otherwise noted, are from the St. Michael's report *Vermont in Transition: A Summary of Social, Economic and Environmental Trends*, the companion volume to this report. When UVM's Center for Rural Studies web and telephone surveys are referenced, these percentages and data are found in the *Looking Ahead: Vermonters' Values and Concerns* reports.

The Council invites every reader to think about conclusions from the data and what directions it might suggest for Vermont. These chapters summarize what the Council heard; the Council's own conclusions can be found in Part Two of *Imagining Vermont*.





Natural Environment



Join a public forum anywhere across the state, and citizens will eloquently and passionately expound upon the value of Vermont’s natural environment. Vermonters love the fields and forests, mountains and waters of their state. They readily express their appreciation for the physical beauty of the state and feelings of tranquility inspired by its natural environment, especially when they compare Vermont to other places and states. Vermont’s identity is linked inextricably to its physical environment, which always has been and continues to be a core value for the people who live here. Some Vermonters, however, perceive threats to the state’s natural resources, and have immediate concerns about management, stewardship, and conservation for the future.

The Council on the Future of Vermont used three intertwined categories to describe the plethora of inputs and comments it received related to the Vermont landscape: (1) natural environment (health, recreation, conservation, and preservation), (2) working lands (specifically agriculture, silvi-culture, and natural resources), and (3) built environments (land use, residential, commercial and industrial development not related to working lands). It is important to note that events and changes in any of these areas always affect the others, sometimes very powerfully.

Vermonters and the Natural World

“These green hills and silver waters are my home, they belong to me,” begins the Vermont state song. In public forums throughout the state Vermonters use words like *tranquil*, *peaceful*, *beautiful*, *special* and *calming* to describe the natural world they see around them. “Vermont is an oasis – the most beautiful piece of real estate in the country,” related one participant from Rutland. Another said, “Vermont means ‘The Green Mountain State’... literally. And that is what it means to me. I love that even our license plates are green! When I think of my Vermont home, I think of the natural environment first.”

Vermonters also relish and celebrate the distinct open, outdoor beauty of their state compared to its more densely populated neighbors to the east, west, and south – preferring Vermont views of fields, farms, and forests to the visual impact of urban, industrial, and commercial landscapes in neighboring states along the East Coast.

As a focus group participant at the Caledonia County Work Camp told the Council, “it’s a woodsy atmosphere with fresh air, being away from the big urban sprawl. A few steps outside your door you can be in a wooded area.”

An overwhelming theme from young writers who submitted pieces to the Council on the Future of Vermont Writing Contest was the awareness and celebration of its four – or five – seasons; youth in Vermont schools wrote about the beauty of fall foliage, cold white winters, and verdant summers in meaningful and simple prose.

“We enjoy our seasons. In the spring when we come out of winter we enjoy it with mud bogging and so much more. In summer we hay and ride around on four-wheelers, dirt bikes and horses too... In the fall we put away all our toys and get ready for winter to hit again...When winter comes, we work in the snow and play in the snow.”

– *Oxbow High School, Grade 12*

“[Vermont] means five seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, and mud season.”

– *Woodstock Union High School, Grade 10*

“Vermont is one of the most beautiful states because we have all four seasons. We experience winter, spring, summer and fall; in spite of everything, they are always there, never missing, always dependable...the feeling of comfort is something you can always expect.”

– *Randolph Union High School, Grade 11*

Legendary as Vermont’s beauty may be, Vermonters understand that images of shimmering streams, rolling green hills, and blue skies are not a complete picture of life here. Living in this environment can be harsh and frustrating. Many Vermonters talked about the long winters, blizzards, floods, resource limitations, and other facts of life here that counter the bucolic images found on calendars and postcards.

For many Vermonters, the state’s natural environment is more than beauty and aesthetics; it is the context that informs a distinct way of living on the land and in community. The landscape both contributes to Vermonters’ sense of connectedness and provides them their cherished sense of privacy. In public forums across the state, residents talked about traveling along isolated dirt roads, cutting logs from their own property, growing their own food, and generally being connected in a positive and intentional way to the outdoor places where they live.

The environment, by turns beautiful and peaceful or harsh and demanding, affects individual and communal behavior. One citizen said, “We’re within driving distance of the best metropolitan areas on the earth, but we can also step out the back door and get

our hands dirty.” Another wrote to the Council that Vermont means, “people who know how to seize a sunny day.” It is interesting to note that throughout the public forums, Vermonters saw the environment as something separate from themselves, but also as something accessible. Citizens of this state revel in the interaction and involvement they have with the natural world, especially when they compare it to their experiences elsewhere.

Recreation and Traditional Uses

Fishing, hunting, trapping, boating, and swimming are activities that Vermonters have long enjoyed. In more recent years, skiing, snowboarding, hiking, bicycling, motorized recreation, and other activities have been added to more traditional outdoor activities.

The importance of easy access to land repeatedly emerged as an issue in public forums, where many participants are deeply concerned that lands that used to be open for hunting, trapping, and fishing are being posted, and woods that used to have more public access are being closed off or subdivided for development. Some sectors of the population feel these changes more acutely than others; the Vermonters who rely on and historically have used the land for traditional purposes and tend to be from more rural areas are more immediately affected than more urban dwellers. The Council heard complaints that residential development and conservation efforts break up largely accessible areas – preventing Vermonters from pursuing those activities that connect them to the landscape.

With their love of the land, and their involvement with it for work or recreation, Vermonters have a very strong conservation ethic; the Development and Land Use chapter includes some history of conservation efforts and the dialogue around environmental regulations in the state.

In public forums, many Vermonters shared their fears with the Council that the traditional uses were vanishing from the landscape or being threatened by potentially conflicting uses. Recreational activities, such as skiing and snowmobiling, or canoeing and motorized watersports, are increasingly seen as potentially mutually exclusive. More often the concerns were about development on or restriction of lands that used to open for traditional uses.

“There is a tradition of conservation rooted in the hunting culture and local farms. I am concerned about where that is heading. Hunting camps have mainly older guys. There needs to be a shared, intergenerational sense of values. This butts up against preservationist visions and increasing suburban values.”

– Rutland

“A road that I drive on used to be hunting camps, and now it is full of homes with fortified gates.”

– Bennington

Several Vermonters talked about the threat that the next generation will be disconnected from the environment, as traditional behaviors and uses are replaced by indoor activities such as playing video games, surfing the Internet, and shopping. One respondent said that, “[The] concentration on technology access reduces exposure to nature/outdoor activities and could impact preservation of the environment and maintaining Vermont quality of life.” Another worried that, “There is nobody to hand off traditional cultural knowledge to. There is tension around use of the land.” Some related it to the phenomenon described in the book *Last Child in the Woods*, and worry that the next generation of Vermonters will lack both the free access to nature and the habit of exploring the natural environment that previous generations have grown up with.

The Health of Vermont’s Environment

Vermonters value the cleanliness and health of the environment in which they live. They point to the clean air, clear waters, and abundant forests as indicators that Vermont’s environment is well cared for. This belief is generally supported by research and trends.

Many measures serve as indicators of the high quality of the environment in Vermont. The state ranks among the highest in the country for the quality of its drinking water, and among the lowest for toxic waste sites, air pollution, and other problems. Some national rankings, such as those of *Forbes* magazine, even suggest that Vermont’s strong environmental health makes it the *greenest* state in the nation.

Recent statewide polls show that Vermonters are committed to protecting the environment, reflecting the fact that the green reputation of the state is of continuing importance in the minds of residents. As one resident put it, “Vermont has a bit of a national image, as liberal, outdoorsy, and environmental.” This pride in being green is also apparent in how Vermonters talk about themselves. Many forum participants described citizens of this state using the words, *environmentally conscious*, *aware*, *concerned*, *proactive*, and characterized them as engaged in and dedicated to the good health of natural resources.

Yet there are many threats to Vermont’s

environmental health. As the St. Michael’s College researchers describe in *Vermont in Transition*, “the state still struggles to find better ways to deal with sewage, manure, and compost as well as increasing volumes of non-organic solid waste – some benign, some toxic.” In general, air quality in Vermont has improved slightly over recent decades, Vermont forests are growing, and populations of certain wildlife (deer, moose, fisher, turkey, osprey, peregrine falcon, for example) have increased. But other major trends including acid precipitation, mercury in rivers and

lakes and phosphorous run off have either remained stable despite efforts to reduce them, or have increased over time.

Vermonters recognize this challenge. Although the state may have been a leader in the past, many negative environmental trends confront Vermont today. One respondent in Barre told the Council on the Future of Vermont that, “Vermont lost its edge on environment – we need a vision to bring us back. We are innovators but we’re not taking advantage of it.” Another insisted that, “While our conservation efforts have been good over the past twenty-five years, we can do better.”

The health of any environment is difficult to measure, and not all the negative impacts facing the state’s ecosystem are from inside the state or subject to its control. All human uses of Vermont’s landscape – whether for agriculture, silviculture, mining, quarrying, recreation, or for transportation, residential, commercial, or industrial development – will have different and often negative residual effects on the cleanliness of the waters, soils, and air. Activities outside of Vermont also have an impact. For example, acid precipitation from

“I think we all share a love of this land, these rolling mountains and valleys of Vermont, and we all want to see it stay relatively the same.”



Midwestern industry and power plants affects forest health, and pollution in Lake Champlain is caused by activity in Canada and New York as well as Vermont. The long reach of watersheds, wildlife habitats, winds, and weather all connect Vermont's environment with ecological issues of regional, national, and global scale.

In public forums, Vermonters reported most concern about threats directly connected to changes to the visual landscape: urban sprawl, extensive clear-cutting of forests, and changes in the management of the environment. Most Vermonters also worry about the health of Lake Champlain and the impact of personal behavior on climate change. They recognize that pollution endangers the state's natural resources and quality of life. Most who testified about the environment expressed a feeling of personal responsibility to contribute to a strong and healthy environment.

"Lake Champlain is so representative of ecological health and it is really hurting. [The] contradiction is that farms are lead contributors to lake pollution but they are the ones we want and need to save for the health of Vermont."

– *St. Albans*

"Pollution: The lakes and rivers are a huge issue for all of us. That's not getting better, it's going to be much worse."

– *St. Albans*

Climate Change

At Council forums from Newport to Bennington, Vermonters shared a variety of perspectives on global climate change and how it presents a distinct threat to Vermont's environment. They discussed the potential results of changing world climate, and expressed concern about how it could affect the state's flora and fauna, as well as the human population and the natural resources humans use everyday. The difficulty in describing these concerns is that the predicted effects of global climate change on any specific area can be vastly different; this was reflected in much of the concern we heard from Vermonters.

"Climate change will affect life as we know it. We need to listen to what we need to do now."

– *Burlington*

"What will happen to the next generation, and our industries, when climate change hits? Especially the ski industry – it's a big deal for this valley and we'd like to know the impacts."

– *Waitsfield*

"Climate change and resource depletion [are challenges]. May affect foliage, ski industry – if not in our lifetime, in our children's."

– *Burlington*

"Climate change and the effect it will have on the economy and our way of life is a concern. This could be an opportunity in a developing 'green' marketplace. Vermont values and resources could place the state well in developing a green economy and could be tied to our identity."

– *Rutland*

"Vermont is on the southern edge of the circumpolar north, ecologically and socio-economically. As the climate changes, this will bring challenges."

– *Craftsbury*

Public opinion ranges widely about the role that climate change will play in Vermont's future environment. Catastrophists worry about what the flooding of coastal areas nationally and globally and the desertification of the Southwest and even Midwest could mean for Vermont. Some fear that fleeing populations could come here to settle and strain the environmental capacity of the state. On the other hand, some disparage the reality of the issue or consider it part of a natural, not man-made, cycle. One respondent in Burlington told the Council, "I think it may be caused by humans or it may be natural, but we're worried too much about trying to stop it – it's coming and there's nothing we can do." And another in Montpelier opined, "People are on the crest of the wave of the topic of global warming. The conversation is just fashionable, not substantive."

Some indicators of changing climate are temperature, precipitation, and days in which additional cooling or heating are required. St. Michael's Vermont in Transition shows us that, "average temperature in Vermont has increased over the past century, with much of the increase occurring during the most recent 50 years." One measure of changing weather and climate is heating-degree or cooling-degree day units. These measurements give an indication of how often someone would have to keep the heat on or use air conditioning in the home. The trend in the Burlington

area is that heating degree-days have decreased since 1950, while cooling degree-days have increased in the same period. Snowfall and average total precipitation in this state have increased over the past century, as have annual variations.

The concern heard from most Vermonters is not whether these changes are taking place, but on how they might affect the state and what the people living here can do about them. Industries dependant on consistent types of weather – such as tourism and recreation as well as the hallmark agriculture, skiing, and maple syrup industries – have the potential to be most affected. Throughout the CFV process, Vermonters said they would like to see people in the state contributing personally to reducing carbon emissions, as well as the state itself taking a role as a leader and national model in order to slow or reverse climate change.

While some Vermonters argue that the state is so small that its efforts cannot significantly affect the process of global climate change, the majority of Vermonters express a strong sense of personal responsibility for the contributions made by personal consumption. They often believe, like this Poultney resident, that “Vermont needs to set an example in addressing climate change.”



Priorities

A young person in Montpelier speculated that, “I think we all share a love of this land, these rolling mountains and valleys of Vermont, and we all want to see it stay relatively the same.”

When it comes to the natural environment, Vermonters recognize that something exists here that does not exist in other places. They are not shy in expressing their love for the special place where they live. As expressed in the state song, this connection to the land is an identifying element for Vermonters. As a shared and finite resource, however, the health of Vermont’s environment suffers from the unintended effects of human activities both in state and out of state.

Asked about general priorities for the future, participants in the forums described a path forward that emphasizes preservation of the state and its natural resources. For many reasons – be it the enjoyment of outdoor recreation, the peace of the wild, or the pleasure of a nice view – Vermonters like the landscape as it is today and want to protect it. Significant change

in the environment, whether in the working landscape or the undeveloped lands and waters, likely would do serious damage to what many feel to be the prime reason they choose to live here.

At the same time, Vermonters recognize that there are competing activities that take place on the land, as well as competing uses for any given natural resource. For example, the aesthetic value of rolling, forested hills, the market value of timber, and the community value of good-paying local jobs are often seen to be in conflict when residents discuss and manage Vermont’s land. Vermonters overwhelmingly say they support agriculture, yet a decreasing number of them are actually involved in it as a livelihood. That said, most Vermonters want to see a future where current natural resources are both protected and used, where the state takes advantage of its positive natural assets without over-exploiting, over-extracting, or over-developing them.

The Council heard from leading economists who see the environment in Vermont as an economic driver, an asset that brings people and jobs into the state because of the quality of life and amenities it provides. Vermonters agree that the environment is a strength, but they also caution that natural beauty alone does not provide for long-term economic stability. They want to see a balance between the uses and activities that we have on the lands and waters (from conservation to development, snowmobiling to bicycling). They want to see an economic future that supports and upholds the Vermont environmental commitment.

Many Vermonters would like to see this state step up its focus on the environment – to be once again a visionary leader. Respondents cited the history of Vermont’s leadership in environmental protection, from the development of bottle redemption laws and billboard ban to the landmark land use and planning laws enacted a few decades ago. They believe that the state should continue to push creative environmental solutions that keep Vermont special and serve as a model for others. The focus for this era on Vermont’s environmental leadership is not on environmental regulation and protection alone, but on intentionally building a dynamic and innovative green economy that depends on, grows from, and enhances the environment and Vermont’s green reputation to bring prosperity and vitality to the state’s residents and communities.