



### Kate Willard: Conserving Land and Promoting Working Landscapes

According to a recent study by the Council on the Future of Vermont, over 97 percent of Vermonters polled endorsed the value of the working landscape as key to our future. Kate Willard has spent her career helping to make that vision a reality. Willard, who works as a Forest Legacy Program Manager, has dedicated the last 24 years to conserving land - first for the Dept. of Agriculture, and then with both Fish & Wildlife and currently, the Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation. Kate Willard has conserved tens of thousands of acres over the span of her career, including working forest land, agricultural land, conservation easements, conserved habitat, and land important for its recreational value.

Willard wants Vermonters to understand the value of working landscapes and to know that we are in danger of losing them, maybe within a generation. "So many people in Vermont live in rural areas and it's hard to keep land open. It's expensive to work the land." And indeed statistical evidence supports Kate's concerns. A 2011 Action Plan developed by the Vermont Working Landscape Partnership states that, "There is a major contradiction between the values expressed by Vermonters for the future of the working landscape and the difficult realities facing the businesses and families that are the stewards of that landscape. Vermont's working landscape defines us, but if existing trends continue it will not exist for our children and our children's children."

Willard and the Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation have been active in combatting these trends. As a program manager for the Forest Legacy Program, Kate Willard works both solely and in cooperation with nonprofit-based land conservation groups to keep working land in active production. "Most of the work that I do is taking proposed acquisition from concept to closing. It usually starts with coordination with nonprofit partners – this is a collaborative process where we get together to discuss the pros and cons of potential projects together before they are submitted. A committee will review the applications and then they'll be submitted to the Forest Service to compete for funding." Although the Forest Legacy Program is nationally competitive, Vermont projects have historically fared well. "We've been really lucky. We get funding almost every year." Once a project has been approved for funding, Willard goes through the arduous process of getting the parcels appraised, figuring out the acreage, doing the necessary title work and surveying and raising the final 25% of the funds (the Forest Legacy Program requires 25% matching).

I ask Kate what inspires her, and she answers readily, "In recent years I've seen this incredible resurgence of young people who are getting into farming and forestry and land-based lifestyles. There is a lot more interest in local foods and Vermont-made products. Vermont is a leader in keeping things local now. One hundred years ago we were producers, then we went the other way and now it seems like we are coming back around." Willard believes we will all benefit from the implications of this trend. "People are healthier if they are more conscious about protecting the area around them. People who are more aware of the world around them are going to be mentally healthier...physically healthier."

For its part, the Dept. of FP&R has been trending away from open-ended land acquisition, toward more targeted and goal-oriented consideration of the pieces of land it pursues. As Willard explains, "Twenty five years ago the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board was established and there was an incredible push toward buying and conserving more land, and we did that 100% for years. I think now what we're looking at is stepping back a little and asking 'how do we manage the land that we do have, and how do we target future acquisitions so that they are in-line with over-arching land management goals. Now we have to figure out what to do from an economic point-of-view so that the properties we do have can really function as working land, not just preserves. That's what we think is important. Sure somebody could come buy a piece of land as an estate property, but what we really want to facilitate is figuring out how to get people on the land to work it."

Finally, I want to know what the rest of us can do to support the acquisition and maintenance of a working landscape in the state, especially because it is a value that is so ingrained in our cultural identity. Willard is quiet. She thinks for some time and then responds. "It is important to get involved. Serve on your town's planning commission or conservation commission. Use lands that are set aside for recreation so that they have a purpose. And value what we have – value our working landscapes and support the people who are out there every day trying to make a living off of the land. It's a hard road and the conditions that come from working the land benefit all of us. Buy local food, buy local wood and products – give back."