

“Coming to terms” with Conservation and Stewardship

As we strive to create and nourish a “culture of conservation” in Kennebec County and beyond, let’s consider what the phrase means. Since a big part of culture is language, agreeing on definitions is part of the foundation for common effort. A dictionary definition of “stewardship” is the “way in which someone organizes and takes care of something.” The same dictionary defines “conservation” as “the protection of valued resources: the preservation, management and care of natural and cultural resources.” These definitions embody a continuum of approaches to woodlands.

At one end might be the utilitarian, product-based, “jobs and the economy” approach, using words like “management,” “sustainability,” and “stewardship.” At the other, those with primary concerns for habitat, biodiversity, and scenic and spiritual values often use terms like “protection,” “ecological value,” and “conservation.”

Of course, this is an over-simplification, and the continuum is really a circle around which we all sit. The Kennebec Woodland Partnership’s “landscape” approach to stewardship brings together organizations and individuals who are passionate about the need to maintain the forested nature of our region, and the value of doing so.

Kennebec Woodland Partners share a common interest in the future of Kennebec County’s forestlands. The Partnership’s fundamental premise is that the ability of any one group to succeed in its mission is enhanced when it works to understand and cooperate with the others. Without markets for wood products and an economically sound forest industry, all woodland owners would have a very difficult time maintaining their forest habitats, and the scenery in Kennebec County would likely be drastically altered. Without the outreach efforts of local land trusts and non-profits, important avenues for education, information, and understanding about sustainable forest management and the value of ecological reserves will be lost.

As we move along the Stewardship Storyline, both individually and as a collective culture, let’s all adopt and promote a broad definition of “conservation,” one that includes “protecting” all the values of woodlands, including timber crops, recreation, unique as well as general habitat, and beyond-the-property-line services such as clean drinking water and scenic viewsheds. Let’s understand that good stewardship includes leaving some places be, and that good conservation includes cutting wood.

Similarly, let’s recognize a comprehensive range of individuals and groups -- from engaged and well-informed landowners to those who make a living from the woods to members of land trusts and the professionals with whom they work -- as stewards and conservationists in the truest sense.