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Making Other Arrangements

Stories for a sustainable future

WOOD-FUELED SCHOOLS

BRISTOL, VERMONT—On a hot June day in Vermont, I poke my head into the gaping mouth of a twelve-foot-tall combustion chamber and watch as the floodlight shines inward, giving the belly of this fuel-hungry beast a sweltering ambiance. It takes eight hundred tons of fuel wood to feed the furnace that heats this high school through one October-to-May season. Over thirty public schools in this state alone have converted their heating systems from fossil fuel to wood fuel, which they burn in the form of matchbook-sized wood chips.

“Biofuel” has become something of a buzzword these days. While talk of corn-based biofuel populates the Midwest, many people in the Northeast are returning to the forests, and for good reasons: wood is less expensive than oil, puts less CO₂ into the atmosphere, and can be grown renewably right here in our own backyard. But there is some concern about what this increasing demand for fuel wood will mean for the forests of the Northeast.

David Brynn, forestry faculty member at the University of Vermont and director of Vermont Family Forests, a small nonprofit located in the town of Bristol, has been mulling over these concerns for years. “Before anything,” David explains, “we have to dramatically reduce our fuel use by being more energy efficient and conservative, so that we don’t take more trees out of the forest than we have to. Then, we need to figure out how to sustainably produce fuel wood from local forests so that it is equitably accessible for all who need it.”



Weaving these ideas together, David has been working with a crew of forest professionals, students, and teachers to create the Vermont Eco-Wood Energy Project, a model for supplying and utilizing fuel wood based on four strategies: sustainable production, efficient use, local sourcing, and fair access. “The Vermont Eco-Wood Energy Project aims to cultivate workable systems for meeting our fuel wood needs while supporting the health of our forests, rather than degrading them,” David tells me, as we walk through a forest stand where students have been inventorying and harvesting trees. He points out signs of a healthy working forest—no-cut buffers around a small stream, little sign of residual stand damage, minimal soil compaction, gently sloping skid trails and logging roads, a handful of downed trees and standing snags left on site for wildlife habitat and nutrient cycling.

Over the past year, the project has been working with two wood-heated public high schools to figure out how well these goals

work in practice. There are some challenges to face, such as the need to establish more local wood chipping facilities and to train more loggers to work with low-impact harvesting equipment. But there are also new doors opening as more people experiment with the model. In Bristol, Vermont, for instance, two forests near the high school will serve as wood suppliers, a local chipping company is ready to buy logs from those forests, and students are being trained in forest monitoring.

The answer to what increasing demand for fuel wood will mean for our forests may very well depend on how successfully people can work together in the Northeast, through projects like Vermont Eco-Wood Energy, to shape the transition from fossil fuels to wood fuels into a benefit for forests and people alike.

—Emily Schadler

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED FISHERY

PORT CLYDE, MAINE—On Sunday morning, Kim Libby drives a load of Maine shrimp, fresh off the fifty-seven-foot dragger boat the *Leslie and Jessica*, to a snowy parking lot in Rockland where customers await a share of the harvest. The small, succulent, pink shrimp, caught less than twenty-four hours ago in the icy, winter waters of the Gulf of Maine, are so tender and sweet they can be eaten raw.

Libby’s weekly delivery is part of an effort by fishermen in Port Clyde, the Midcoast Fishermen’s Association (www.midcoastfishermen.org), who have banded together with the hopes of saving

a working-class fishing community, a fast-disappearing way of life. Scientists continue to predict declines in fish stocks. Farmed seafood drives shrimp prices down, and Maine's waterfront land values continue to rise. Offshore, large trawler boats catch greater quantities of seafood for fewer processors, and the market rewards these high-volume and low-quality catches. "We're basically fishing ourselves out of existence," says Craig Pendleton, a Maine shrimp fisherman.

For years, fishermen have been looking for ways to make more money harvesting fewer fish. In 2007, spurred by fishery and farm advocacy groups, the Port Clyde fishermen decided to take their catch directly to consumers and began the Community Supported Fishery (CSF), modeled directly after the land-based success, Community Supported Agriculture. During the fourteen-week season, consumers paying \$189 receive ten pounds weekly of fresh, head-on northern shrimp—\$1.35 a pound. The economies of the CSF make sense for both the fishermen, who would get about a third of that price from a processor, and consumers, who would pay slightly more per pound at the supermarket. In addition, the small, diversified fleet is working on changes to their nets to prevent by-catch and would like to become the first biodiesel-powered fleet in the world. "We're trying to fish in a different way," Libby says. "We want high-quality product that we own from dock to plate."

Still, CSFs face significant hurdles, from regulations concerning the distribution of raw, unprocessed seafood, to the need for consumer education. "The average consumer doesn't know what to do with a whole head-on fish," says Jennifer Plummer, coordinator with the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, a fishing advocacy group. Nevertheless, the Port Clyde fishermen added a twelve-week summer share this year, which includes a variety of traditional New England groundfish, as

well as tutorials on filleting.

CSF organizers say their innovative program addresses the unique challenges of sustaining working waterfront communities in an era when many fisheries are depleted. The CSF fosters relationships between consumers and fishermen, both of whom have a vested interest in the ocean's vitality—especially when it means fresh, local seafood.

—Peter Smith

CONNECTING THROUGH SONG

COLRAIN, MASSACHUSETTS—I've been a touring singer/songwriter since 1992 and have offered The Soulful Landscape workshops and keynote concerts since 2001 (www.ericawheeler.com). The focus of my work is to foster the emotional connection between people and place, inspiring them to act on behalf of places they care about. This is an exciting time for me as I have been able to bring together my interest and education in environmental work with my career as an artist to try and make a difference in the world.

The Soulful Landscape is based on the premise that everyone has stories of place and belonging waiting to be remembered and revealed. During the workshops, I start with a presentation of place-based songs, stories, and visual arts to empower participants to express their experiences and observations from their own unique viewpoints. We do some writing prompts where people uncover what's going on in their lives, and then they write about a place that has a lot of meaning for them. I ask them to see if they can find out how these two writings interrelate. Then I ask a few brave souls to share what they've written. As an attempt to mirror back to them the power I feel in their words I usually create a "song on the spot," pulling lines from their actual writing. I do this because when I sing their words back to them, they seem to be heard and experienced on a whole new level. I consider this healing work. We give our



memories form, turning them into songs, stories, poems, and essays. We remember who we are by remembering the places that have power and meaning in our lives.

My latest CD, *Good Summer Rain*, was sponsored in part by The Trust for Public Land. Each song is about the relationship between people and place from different angles and perspectives. During my concerts, my songs and stories evoke a sense of place in the listener. My hands-on workshops give them an opportunity to access and articulate their own stories of place and belonging. My keynote presentations help people reconnect with themselves and their passion for acting on behalf of the land. If we hope to inspire a broad base of public support for a sustainable future, we can reach some people with facts and figures, we can appeal to their minds and sense of reason. Fear can motivate, but so can love. The arts can reach people not by telling them what to think or do or how to change, but by appealing to the heart and letting them draw their own conclusions.

—Erica Wheeler

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