Building Partnerships, Sustaining Communities:
A Strategic Framework for Enhancing Social, Environmental, and Economic Well-Being in the Northern Forest Region

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Abstract
For fifteen years a wide range of both public and private organizations have worked to address rapid changes in land ownership, economic, community, and cultural patterns in the Northern Forest region of northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Over the past six years, the Northern Forest Center has conducted extensive research and interviews, and convened a series of regional conferences including the 2002 Northern Forest Community Leadership Exchange designed to build understanding of an emerging vision and strategic framework for the region’s long-term well-being. This new framework incorporates community, cultural, economic, educational, and environmental needs and opportunities, and builds on the premise that only through active partnerships that cross geographic and sectoral boundaries can the region secure a truly prosperous and sustainable future.

I. Introduction
On November 15-16, 2002, about 120 leaders from diverse perspectives and backgrounds gathered for the first Northern Forest Community Leadership Exchange. Their purpose: to think as a group about how to secure a prosperous and sustainable future for the Northern Forest region that stretches across northern Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York.

The Exchange was a work session designed to build cross-boundary partnerships and leverage resources around an emerging vision for the Northern Forest as a place that supports healthy forest ecosystems, vibrant cultures, caring, effective communities, and diversified, sustainable economies. It was designed to build upon preliminary interviews with regional leaders, the Northern Forest Center’s 2000 Northern Forest Wealth Index, and the work of scores of regional organizations.

Exchange participants included economic development professionals, large and small landowners, foresters, millworkers, educators, business owners, environmentalists, health and human service providers, cultural specialists, and other leaders of diverse organizations and networks. By working in teams and as a whole, participants articulated the core elements of a new strategic framework that can guide the work of people and organizations across the Northern Forest as we respond to the economic, environmental, and social changes that have been sweeping the region.

By building partnerships that cross geographical, sectoral, and ideological boundaries, and leveraging the collective energy of ongoing and emerging initiatives, we believe people and organizations across the region can attract the resources, build the capacity, and take the actions needed to establish the Northern Forest as a national, even international, model for people seeking to live sustainably and prosperously in a forested place.

II. The Northern Forest: A Context of Challenge, Initiative and Success
The Northern Forest region is home to the people and ecosystems of the largest intact forest in the eastern United States. Its story is one of people continually adapting to the challenges and opportunities presented by the natural world and by the global forces that have led to dramatic environmental, economic, and cultural transformations.

This nationally significant region stretches nearly 400 miles from New York’s Tug Hill Plateau and Adirondack Mountains, across Lake Champlain and Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom, New Hampshire’s North Country, and the Western Mountains, Highlands, St. John Valley and Downeast Lakes on Maine’s border with Canada. It is a region tied together by boreal and northern hardwood forests, wetlands, lakes, rolling hills, and rugged mountains. It comprises the headwaters of the Northeast’s major rivers and human cultures, economies, and communities that reflect the rugged character of the land.

In the past dozen years, more than 10 million of the Northern Forest’s 30 million acres have changed hands. As the industrial landowners that have dominated the region for more than a century respond to the economic pressures of a globalizing industry, people are struggling to respond to mill closures, layoffs, and shifting land ownership patterns. Many communities face high unemployment, out-migration, and uncertainty about what the future might hold.
Still the Northern Forest region has great strengths – safe communities, clean air and water, vast forests, and a rich heritage. And, in all four states, community leaders are coming together in new ways to understand complex issues and capitalize on the region’s assets.

Successes abound:
- Communities are developing interpretive centers, driving tours, and collaborative marketing projects that highlight the region’s natural and cultural heritage while strengthening local economies;
- Green certification programs are leading to more sustainable timber harvesting in the region’s commercial woodlands and opening opportunities for new markets;
- Educators are finding new ways to connect lesson plans and curricula with the experiences of students and assets and needs of their communities;
- Conservation groups and public agencies are securing productive forest ecosystems through innovative uses of conservation easements and full-fee land acquisition;
- Small businesses are banding together to develop peer support networks and collaborate on marketing, purchasing and manufacturing initiatives.

(Note: Visit the Northern Forest Center’s website — www.northernforest.org — to learn about real success stories from across the Northern Forest.)

III. An Emerging Vision

Work to understand and address the changes sweeping the Northern Forest began 15 years ago with the work of the Congressionally sponsored Northern Forest Lands Study, Governors’ Task Force on Northern Forest Lands, and Northern Forest Lands Council. It has been further developed through the regional work of conservation organizations and by many cultural, economic, educational and business organizations.

Since 1997, the Northern Forest Center has been helping to build regional partnerships to conserve and enhance the civic, cultural, economic, and ecological wealth of the Northern Forest. In 2000, the Center published the Northern Forest Wealth Index as a baseline assessment of the region’s community, cultural, economic, educational, and environmental well-being. And in fall 2002, the Center convened the first Northern Forest Community Leadership Exchange to formally begin building regional partnerships to expand the resources and capacities of people and institutions working to address the interrelated social, environmental, and economic issues facing the region.

As we reflect on all this work, it becomes clear that a consensus is building around a sustainable vision for the Northern Forest.

This vision grows from people’s deep connection to and responsibility for the landscape, and a growing understanding of the relationships among the region’s ecosystems, economies, communities, and cultures. Tangible elements of this emerging vision include a place characterized by:

- A widespread appreciation for the unique character and culture of the Northern Forest region;
- An abiding belief in the value of working together across the region;
- A rural landscape, composed of a mosaic of protected lands and waters surrounded by sustainable and productive working forests, that serves as an economic and ecological foundation;
- Forest products manufacturing based on top quality forests and skilled craftsmanship;
- Tourism and recreation based upon a natural landscape unparalleled in the east and upon the region’s rich and unique cultural heritage;
- Strong local economies where people support local products and businesses while still connecting to the broader world;
- Place-based educational systems that reflect and respond to the character, assets, and needs of local communities; and
- Communities where people choose to settle to enjoy economic opportunities, access to the landscape, and connections to family, friends, land, and culture.

IV. Strategic Framework

In preparation for the 2002 Leadership Exchange, the Center and our partners conducted scores of interviews with leaders across the region to learn about the issues they consider most important to their communities, the actions they support to address such issues, and the values and principles they believe should underlie work to improve community and regional well-being. These issues were further explored and developed by Exchange participants.

A new strategic framework is emerging from this work that can help support new partnerships and leverage resources to better support the good work taking place in communities across the region. This framework includes three elements:

- Guiding Values, Vision, and Principles — to articulate our ideals, provide inspiration, and serve as a reference point for evaluating new and ongoing initiatives;
- Core Strategies — to bring alignment and cohesion to the work that is taking place in a wide range of sectors and at a variety of scales across the region; and
Action Plans – to begin identifying key leverage points and opportunities for action to make the vision of a prosperous and sustainable future a reality.

A. Draft Guiding Values and Principles

Our work in the Northern Forest should be guided by the time-honored human values of honesty, integrity, compassion, respect, courage, discipline, hard work, tolerance, inclusiveness, fairness, and humility. In our work toward a more prosperous and sustainable future in the region, we shall:

- Accept moral responsibility for our place in the world, for living sustainably, and for our connections to people and cultures world-wide.
- Respect and work for the healthy development of every person and community.
- Respect and work for the health and well-being of the earth’s natural systems.

Our work regionally in the Northern Forest should be based on maintaining and enhancing the health and well-being of our rural, forested landscape, which is the underpinning of the shared character, culture, and economy of the Northern Forest region. We must embrace the knowledge that our actions are affected by what has gone before and that we, in turn, are responsible to future generations for the integrity of the planet and the community of life that we bequeath to them.

We must respect the diversity that exists in communities across the Northern Forest, and acknowledge that this diversity is a key strength of our region.

In order to live responsibly, respectfully, and successfully in a global culture and economy, we must strive for a regional culture and economy that is strong and self-reliant, and that is able to support local communities through a sustainable balance of large- and small-scale forest product manufacturing, tourism and recreation, and other activities.

In working to promote healthy, vibrant, self-reliant communities in the Northern Forest, we shall:

- Maintain and enhance the health and well-being of our rural, forested landscape;
- Encourage civic responsibility and citizen participation in matters that affect them;
- Take action at the smallest scale appropriate;
- Support local identities – locally determined – and traditional lifestyles;
- Communicate openly and freely, with full flow of information;
- Build inclusive partnerships that cross sectors, institutions, boundaries, and perspectives;
- Seek economic opportunities that lie within the carrying capacities of local communities and local ecology, and are respectful of local culture.

B. Core Strategies

In keeping with these values and principles, work toward a sustainable and prosperous future in the Northern Forest can be organized around eight core strategies. These grow directly from the Northern Forest Community Leadership Exchange, interviews conducted prior to the event, the Northern Forest Wealth Index, and other research and dialogue conducted in the past several years.

Each of these core strategies reaches across political and geographical boundaries and is an integral part of a comprehensive strategy for the Northern Forest region. By focusing our work and building cross-boundary partnerships to advance each of these strategies, while also exploring and capitalizing on the interrelationships among them, we can make great strides toward improving the overall well-being of the Northern Forest region.

Culture and Regional Identity

Explore, celebrate, and retain our regional culture and identity while, at the same time, supporting local cultures and remaining engaged with the cultural and economic forces of the world around us.

Place-Based Education and Lifelong Learning

Develop educational programs that reflect and respond to the character, assets, and needs of the Northern Forest, and integrate educational programs and economic activity to provide people with rewarding employment opportunities.

Integrity of the Forest Ecosystem

Continually improve the sustainability of our managed forests, build on recent land conservation successes, and respond to ongoing changes in land ownership to avoid fragmentation of the forest, maintain biodiversity, and allow people to have full and diverse relationships with the land.

Value-Added Forest Products

Support a balance of large- and small-scale value-added forest products firms that provide living-wage jobs, are ecologically sustainable, and can coexist with forest-based recreation and tourism.

Tourism and Recreation Development and Marketing

Develop the services, products, infrastructure, and regional marketing and branding needed to support arts, heritage, and ecotourism-based economic development that creates living-wage jobs while contributing to the overall quality of life of Northern Forest residents.

Small Business Development

Promote small business development that is infused with the spirit of entrepreneurship and risk-taking, supported
by capital investment, business training and networks, and that is grounded in the values of healthy communities, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage.

**Telecommunication and Transportation Infrastructure**

Expand opportunities for economic, educational, community, and cultural development through support of ecologically appropriate telecommunications and transportation infrastructure that allows people and businesses in the region to effectively connect with each other and the broader world.

**Health and Healthy Communities**

Build partnerships to better support the web of relationships among people and among institutions that allow us to live and work together, and that ensure the physical, mental, and social well-being of individuals and families.

**C. Action Plans**

Following are just a few examples of action steps identified during the Leadership Exchange. While actions related to the core strategies listed above are many and can be taken at a variety of scales by a variety of organizations, the following examples represent opportunities for action that cut across strategies and can serve as real leverage points for improving the region's overall well-being – economic, social, and ecological.

- Build connections among local heritage initiatives and explore the potential for a regional network of heritage areas;
- Continue work to improve and expand green certification of forest lands and forest products, and encourage institutional purchasing of locally produced green products;
- Secure new and increased capital investments and financing for forest product manufacturers and small businesses;
- Improve and expand entrepreneurial support and training programs to encourage innovation and risk-taking among small businesses;
- Build local and regional networks to train and support educators in place-based education;
- Strengthen relationships between academic research institutions and the businesses and other organizations that depend upon new research and development;
- Increase access to broadband internet service in rural communities across the Northern Forest;
- Expand wellness programs to reduce health risks among Northern Forest residents;
- Develop training and networks to support sustainable community development;
- Develop a regional advocacy voice to advance state and federal policies and funding to support coordinated sustainable rural development initiatives in the Northern Forest.

Many of these actions represent efforts that are already underway in some form or another. Others represent new ideas for the region. When examined closely, though, all of them hold the promise of advancing a number of the core strategies described above.

As we move forward with these, or other, action steps it is important to remain mindful of the interrelationships among our core strategies, the synergies among our organizations, and the common needs and opportunities facing our communities across geographical and political boundaries.

**IV. Regional Partnerships**

The strategic framework outlined here is too ambitious for any one organization. It also is a work in progress. We look forward to working with partners across the region to continually refine and develop the framework over time.

On November 13-14, 2003, the Center is hosting the 2nd annual Northern Forest Community Leadership Exchange with the Northeastern States Research Cooperative under the joint title Partnerships. This event creates an important opportunity to build connections between community leaders and academic researchers, and to build on the work of the first Exchange to further advance regional strategies for sustainable regional development in the Northern Forest.

The promise of the Northern Forest can only be achieved through partnerships and cooperation in pursuit of a shared vision. Whether it is working to further develop this strategic framework, advancing one of the action steps described here, or pursuing some other initiative to improve the quality of life in the Northern Forest, it is through partnerships and leveraging our collective abilities that we will achieve the full potential of our communities and the region as a whole.

We invite non-profit organizations, businesses, state and federal agencies, schools, and anyone interested in the region's overall well-being to join with us and with one another to find ways to move this strategy forward. And we challenge people and institutions in the region to look across boundaries – political, geographical, sectoral, or ideological – for opportunities to collaborate and join forces.
Great Blue Heron at dawn in late September.