Northern Forest Wealth Index: Exploring a Deeper Meaning of Wealth

BY MICHAEL WILSON

The product of this initiative, the Northern Forest Wealth Index: Exploring a Deeper Meaning of Wealth, was published in August 2000 to provide the region with three important tools:

- A consensus-based articulation and assessment of core assets and values important to regional well-being;
- A system for tracking regional well-being into the future, and a baseline for gauging change; and
- A framework for crafting a shared vision for the Northern Forest based on stewardship of the region's community, cultural, economic, educational, and environmental wealth.

More specifically, the Wealth Index presents 39 indicators related to 24 regional assets in five categories: Community, Culture, Economy, Education, and Environment. The data in the report reveal many common issues facing communities across the Northern Forest, and point to opportunities for people in the region to work together to address them.

An Emerging Region

The Northern Forest first came to regional prominence in 1988 with the sale of nearly one million acres of timberland by Diamond International Corporation. Though it is not unusual for large tracts of land to change hands within the forest industry, the “Diamond sale,” in the context of the fevered real estate market of the late 1980s, raised significant questions about the region's economy and traditional way of life.

In response, Congress authorized the U.S. Forest Service to conduct the Northern Forest Lands Study (NFLS), and the governors of the four Northern Forest states appointed a Governor's Task Force to advise the Forest Service. The NFLS identified policy options ranging from tax reform to land use planning but stopped short of recommendations.

In 1990, with support from the four states, Congress authorized the Northern Forest Lands Council. For the next four years, the Council conducted an intense examination of the region including extensive public “listening sessions” and involvement by thousands of people within and outside the Northern Forest. The Council’s report, Finding Common Ground: Conserving the Northern Forest, was released in 1994, and contained nearly forty recommendations. Since then, numerous public and private initiatives have sought with varying levels of success to implement one or more of these recommendations.

The NFLS and the NFLC, combined with attention from the conservation community and the media, have led to growing awareness of the powerful connections that run east and west across the Northern Forest. More and more people have come to recognize that communities across the northern tier of the

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four states have more in common with each other than with the densely settled urban and suburban communities that surround the region.

Along with the emergence of the Northern Forest, though, have come intense debates over the future of the forest — and the economy and culture it supports.

The Northern Forest Center

The Northern Forest Center was founded in 1997 to act as a convener of ideas and dialogue on Northern Forest issues ranging from ecology to economics, community development, and cultural heritage. Our programs are built upon a belief that we cannot conserve the forest ecosystems of the Northern Forest without also striving to conserve and enhance the economic, civic, and cultural well-being of the region. This means we must understand and value the social and economic as well as environmental values and concerns of the people who live in the region.

The Center's mission is to build a public consensus to preserve and enhance the cultural, civic, economic, and environmental wealth of the Northern Forest. To this end, we work to build regional identity, increase citizen capacity, and promote stewardship of regional assets and values. We work at the intersection of culture, civic engagement, economic development, and conservation — weaving into a regional fabric threads that transcend state identities and politics.

The Northern Forest Wealth Index serves as a model of the Center's approach to work in the Northern Forest, and as a foundation for continuing that work.

The Northern Forest Wealth Index

During the past decade, people in New York, New England, and across the country have come to recognize that the overall well-being of their communities is a function not just of financial wealth, but of a wide range of other factors such as health, safety, and the integrity of natural ecosystems. To understand the overall well-being of a community, or a region like the Northern Forest, we must first recognize that community or region as a system with properties that arise from the interrelationships among the parts.

With this premise in mind, the Northern Forest Center recruited a steering committee in 1999 to work as a group to identify and assess core assets and values important to the overall wealth of the Northern Forest. We sought to bring together a group of people with a wide range of professional, political, personal, and geographical perspectives; people who held opposing positions about environmental and economic issues; people whose families have lived in the Northern Forest for generations; and people who have lived in the region only a few years.

The Wealth Index Steering Committee met for the first time in April 1999 to explore a seemingly simple question: What are the things you experience in your day-to-day life that contribute to your quality of life — or things you don't experience that would add to your quality of life if you did?

Initial discussions generated a list of hundreds of assets and values. Next, we engaged scores of other Northern Forest residents in community meetings designed to gather additional ideas and to identify common regional themes. Eventually, we identified a core set of 24 assets and values, in five categories, that the steering committee agreed were critical to regional well-being. The next step was to develop indicators that would help us understand the status of these core assets and values.

As with the original list of assets, we generated a long list of potential indicators, and then we evaluated them on the basis of three primary criteria:

- Does this indicator accurately tell us something we want to know about the related asset?
- Can we efficiently gather data for this indicator that is comparable across the four-state Northern Forest region?
- Can we track this indicator over time?

Based on these criteria, we narrowed the list of potential indicators and began collecting and analyzing the data included in the report.

Whenever possible, we used data collected at the national level according to consistent standards. In most cases we presented information about the Northern Forest in comparison to the other parts of the four Northern Forest states. In some cases we presented trends over time.

Crafting the rest of the report involved working with the steering committee to develop consensus-based language describing the importance of each asset to regional well-being, and the relevance of each indicator to the related asset. Between January and June 2000 Steering Committee members were given opportunities to comment on drafts of the report's text, and to discuss the text as a group. While this process was tedious, it encouraged participants to develop a deeper understanding of the values and motivations of others, and led to language that was both sensitive and comprehensive.

Content & Findings

Based on the work of the steering committee, the Northern Forest Wealth Index examines regional well-being in the context of the interrelationships among five categories, or elements, of wealth.

- Community: The web of relationships that allow us to live and work together and that ensure the physical, mental, and social well-being of individuals and families.
- Culture: The characteristics that help define who we are as a people and how we experience and share the traditions that evolve in the region.
- Economy: The sustainable use of
natural, human and other resources to meet human and community needs by generating financial wealth that stays within the region.

- Education: The learning of skills, information, values and attitudes necessary for both children and adults to fulfill their potential as members of communities within or outside the region.

- Environment: The health and productivity of the natural systems which support the diversity of life, economic and recreational activities, and opportunities for personal renewal.

Within these categories the Wealth Index identifies 24 specific assets or values that contribute to regional well-being, and offers 39 indicators designed to provide insight into the status of these core assets across the region.

Example of the range of assets explored in the Wealth Index include: Social Capital; Healthy People; Safety; Maintenance of Cultural Identity and Traditions; Self Reliance and Resourcefulness; Local Control of Financial Capital; Diversity of Employment Opportunities; Diversity of Land Ownership; Early Childhood Education; Grades 1-12 Education; Air Quality; Healthy, Productive Forests; and Access to Land and Water.

Related indicators include: Voter Participation; Preventable Deaths; Domestic Assault; Local Historical Societies; Deposits in Locally Controlled Banks; Earned Wages per Industry; Land Ownership Patterns; Preprimary School Enrollment; High School Diplomas; Acidity of Precipitation; Net Tree Growth and Removal; Hiking Trails; and Boat Launches.

From this data, several trends and specific findings stand out:

- Of the 27 indicators where data are compared between counties in the Northern Forest and other counties in the four states, 24 show consistent trends across three of the four states and 14 show consistent trends in all four states.

- In all four states property and violent crimes are lower in the Northern Forest than other areas.

- In all four states preventable death rates are higher in the Northern Forest than other areas.

- Forest product manufacturing jobs are declining across the region while tourism and recreation jobs increase, but manufacturing jobs offer consistently higher wages.

- The percentages of people with high school diplomas and bachelor’s degrees is consistently lower in the Northern Forest than in other parts of the four states.

- Across the region precipitation is consistently more acidic than “normal precipitation.”

- The volume of standing sawtimber is steadily increasing in New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire, while there was a slight decline in Maine between 1982 and 1995.

- The percent of all land that is forested is consistently higher in the Northern Forest than in other parts of the four states.

The Wealth Index does not offer conclusions or suggestions for addressing regional challenges and opportunities. It does, though, reveal a wide range of issues, opportunities, and challenges that
Violent & Property Crimes

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Northern Forest | Other Counties

A Path Forward

That the world is changing is beyond doubt. New technologies, communication systems, and financial practices are dramatically speeding up the movement of information and financial capital around the world, and changing the ways we live our lives. The Northern Forest Wealth Index provides a tool for guiding change in the Northern Forest. It is the product of a great deal of reflection by people who care about the region's future, and it articulates many strengths the region has to build upon and challenges the region must face.

The Wealth Index also presents a snapshot of the Northern Forest as a place defined by shared community, cultural, economic, educational, and environmental issues. Given this set of information, and the commonalities it reveals, we believe now is the time to think even more deeply about what this report tells us, and to consider the following questions:

- Where is the Northern Forest heading?
- Where do we want the Northern Forest to go?
- What are the regional assets we can build upon?
- How can we work together to get where we want to go?

Answering such questions will not be easy. In the coming months, and years, the Northern Forest Center is committed to using the Wealth Index as a foundation for working with people across the region to articulate and take action to implement a shared vision for the Northern Forest that is based on stewardship of the region's ecological, cultural, civic, and economic wealth.

The Wealth Index provides a framework around which people in the Northern Forest can converge and work together to take full advantage of the region's potential. We are confident that by working together, understanding regional assets, and remaining mindful of regional values, people in the Northern Forest can secure a future marked by a prosperous economy, healthy ecosystems, vibrant communities, and a dynamic culture.

To purchase copies of the Northern Forest Wealth Index, contact the Center's Concord, NH, office: PO. Box 210, Concord, NH 03302, (603) 229-0679, nfc@northernforest.org. You also can visit the Northern Forest Center on the web at www.northernforest.org.