

# Introduction

## DEFINING A REGION

In the late 1980s, the term “Northern Forest” came into use to describe the contiguous boreal and hardwood forests of northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. The region has since been described as the largest stretch of intact forest in the eastern United States—a 30-million acre landscape of rugged mountains, rolling hills, abundant wildlife, innumerable lakes and wetlands, and the headwaters of the major rivers of the Northeast. It is home to more than a million people who live in rural communities, work in a forest-based economy, and are part of a 10,000-year history of people making their lives in the woods.

Awareness of this place as a region grew as residents and state and federal policy makers sought to understand and address changing landownership and economic patterns. In the early 1990s, several studies and projects, such as the USDA Forest Service's Northern Forest Lands Study and the congressionally-authorized Northern Forest Lands Council, sought to understand and document the region's ecological wealth, traditional economy, and people's concerns for the future.

The Council held solicited resident participation to shape its policy recommendations for conserving the

Northern Forest. Because of its policy nature, however, it did not aim to answer some of the more personal questions about the region's identity, such as:

- *How have people in the Northern Forest created and developed a sense of place?*
- *What does the term “Northern Forest” mean to people?*
- *How do people identify with the region's landscape and history, and how is that balanced with local senses of place and community?*

In 1997, interest in these questions prompted the Northern Forest Center to undertake this study of regional identity—to explore the Northern Forest as a place, including its cultures, ecologies, landscapes, histories, communities, and values. Since the Council's report was published in 1994, the Northern Forest often has been described as a political and environmental issue, especially in the media. But the cultural, community, and personal relationships that shape people's sense of place and the region's identity have received much less public attention. Understanding these relationships is critical to anyone who wants to build a better future for the region.

## A GUIDE FOR THE READER

In 1998 and 1999 I interviewed 79 Northern Forest residents to explore ways in which people and communities develop a sense of place. Excerpts from these interviews, published here, tell how some Northern Forest residents see their communities, see commonalities and differences between their communities and others, and see how their local place identities fit within the broader region. These interviews serve as snapshots—points of view from people who live in all four states, whose careers range from carpenter to guide, teacher to entrepreneur, logger to occupational therapist, paper mill machinist to sheep farmer.

Three broad themes emerged from the interviews, each based on personal connections at different scales: individuals with community, individuals with place and the land, and people with their heritage. *At Home in the Northern Forest* is organized around these three levels of relationships, ranging from the intimate to the abstract, as follows:

### CHAPTER 1: *People*

This section reflects people's beliefs about the human relationships, values and ethics that shape their

communities, and their reflections on small-town life. It also describes perceptions of changing community make-up, interests, and overall health.

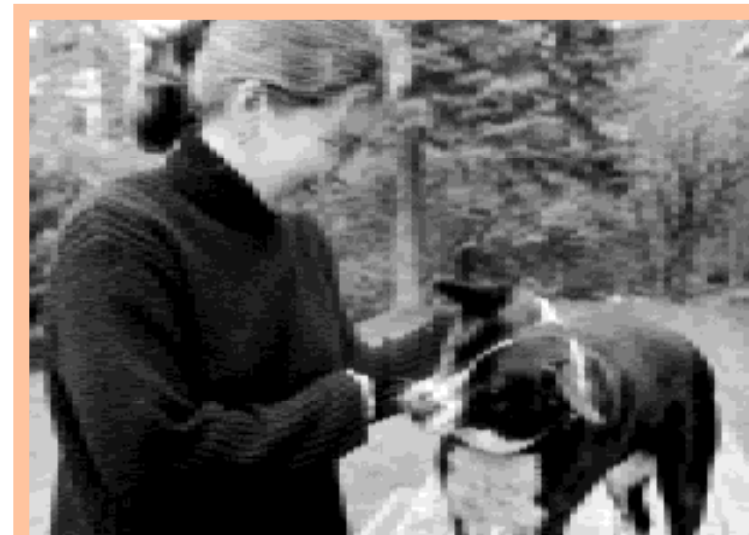
### CHAPTER 2: *The Land*

This section outlines people's attitudes toward physical places—including the forest, open spaces, waters, and other natural and built environments. It also describes people's uses and desires of the working landscape, and their perceptions of the future of the forest and forest-based industries.

### CHAPTER 3: *Culture & Identity*

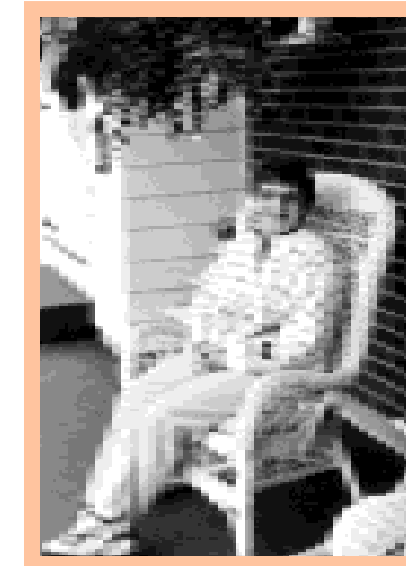
The third section identifies cultural elements, people's relationships with their own histories, regional economic conditions and changes, and people's understandings of the Northern Forest as a place and a region.

Along with each set of quotes you'll find observations on the subject at hand. Some of the infor-



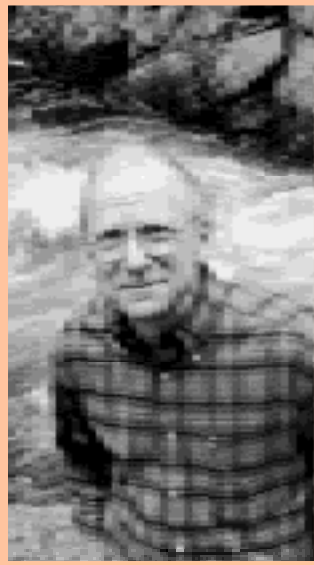
*Author Laura Tam meets Meg in Keene, New York*

*Frances Haynes, Colebrook, New Hampshire*



“Regional identity has to do with where one stays, where one's roots are, and consequently with where long-standing social traditions can develop. It is these traditions that provide the best opportunities for an investment in one's own place, in the community and the land.”

—Michael Hough  
*Out of Place*



*Pete Fish, Keene, NY*

mation is gleaned from my work and research in the Northern Forest, and some summarizes comments from the interviews that are not directly quoted. In either case, my interpretations are meant to provide a context for people’s remarks—which are based on their own perceptions—rather than a quantified or definitive description of the Northern Forest.

Opinions among the 79 people who generously shared their time and their views for this work varied widely; we made no attempt to reach consensus, and no individual’s remarks should be interpreted as the prevailing opinion among Northern Forest residents.

*Nancy Kruger, Bethlehem, NH*



Instead, the agreements—where they happen—and the divergent views—where they occur—are evidence of the fiber of life in the Northern Forest, seen through the eyes of the people who make their home here. The quotations themselves are either

direct quotes or paraphrases of what I heard in my interviews, and are not necessarily the opinions of the Northern Forest Center.

I’d like to thank the many people who allowed us to interview and/or photograph them for *At Home in the Northern Forest*. Readers should note that the photographs are intended to illustrate the ideas and themes in the book; the use of any person’s photo does not necessarily correlate to the quotes on the accompanying page.

Make your own journey through *At Home in the Northern Forest* to explore some of the personal aspects of life in this place. Listen to the voices—passionate and calm, definite and uncertain, confident and questioning—as they tell of the place they call home. The more we understand the regional identity and sense of place in the Northern Forest, the more able we will be to build a better, more inclusive future marked by community health, economic stability, environmental and cultural integrity, and personal well being.

*Laura E. Tam  
March 2001*



*Processing logs in Tupper Lake, New York*