

New England losing forest cover -- scholars call for accelerated conservation

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New England forests are at a turning point. A new study released today by the Harvard Forest reports that, following almost 200 years of natural reforestation, forest cover is declining in all six New England states. The authors of the Wildlands and Woodlands report call for conserving 70 percent of New England as forestland, a target that they say is critical to protecting vital natural benefits that would be costly, and in some cases impossible, to replace.

"We've been given a second chance to determine the future of the region's forests. This report calls attention to the pressing need to couple New England's existing conservation capacity and shared land ethic with a vision for the next century in which forests remain an integral part of our livelihoods," said David Foster, lead author of the report and director of the Harvard [Forest](#). Foster points to clean water, climate protection, and renewable wood supply as examples of the forest's many benefits to society.

The report, "Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape," was produced by the Harvard Forest of Harvard University, and authored by 20 scholars in forest science, policy, and finance from across New England. It examines forest trends and promotes strategies for permanently retaining 70 percent of the New England landscape in forest over the next 50 years. The vision would triple the amount of conserved land in New England while still leaving ample room for future development. It calls for conserving most of the landscape (63 percent) as working woodlands owned and managed by private landowners, and

protecting a smaller portion (7 percent) as wildland reserves. This regional vision has roots in the 2005 Wildlands and Woodlands vision for Massachusetts, also released by the Harvard Forest, which called to protect one half of Massachusetts (2.5 million acres) in forest. Since the publication of the Massachusetts W&W report in 2005, a growing partnership of more than 60 organizations from public, private, and non-profit sectors has been working to achieve the vision in Massachusetts and elsewhere in New England.

The Wildlands and Woodlands report cites development and changing forest ownership patterns as two major drivers of forest loss and instability in the region. It points to the need to support the interests of the many private land owners who have stewarded the majority of the region's forests for decades and seek to keep their forestland intact. Rob Lilieholm, co-author and professor of forest policy at the University of Maine, Orono, points out that a vision for conserving forests at this scale holds many benefits for the people of the region: "I think it's clear that we all stand to gain from the Wildlands and Woodlands vision. Landowners will have more options in how they choose to manage their lands. The region's forest products sector, vital to the economic health of countless rural communities, will benefit from a secure source of timber. And residents and visitors alike will be able to enjoy these working landscapes and the wide range of services they provide now and in the future."

The Wildlands and Woodlands report outlines a suite of collaborative, voluntary approaches to accelerate conservation. James Levitt, co-author of the report and director of the Harvard Forest Program on Conservation Innovation, notes, "New England has, for nearly four centuries, been a leader in conservation. With the groundswell of regional interest in Wildlands and Woodlands specifically and in landscape-scale conservation generally, New Englanders are well-positioned to provide leadership in the practice of innovative

conservation, this time in the 21st century."

Provided by Harvard University

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