

# **Forest Conversations: The Relationships Between Town Forests and Their Communities in Vermont**

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**Abstract**

This research analyzes the relationships between two Vermont town forests and their communities. Using a mix of qualitative research methods, including walking interviews and auto-ethnographic field notes, this project seeks to understand how town residents think about the forests and how assemblage theory can help us understand their relationships. The findings indicate a strong historic, social, and emotional interconnection between the forests and their communities. While forest users tend not view their forests in terms of assemblage, they acknowledge their interdependence. This suggests a reworking of assemblage theory is necessary to better fit practical applications like these case studies. This paper forwards Practical Environmental Assemblage Theory (PEAT) as an effective distillation of assemblage theory to fit practical applications on the local scale.

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## **Introduction**

This project aims to understand the interconnected relationships between two town forests and their respective communities by applying an assemblage framework: Maple Shade Town Forest and Westford, and Catamount Community Forest in Williston. The research was guided by two questions: “What meaning do town forests hold for their communities?” and “How can assemblage theory help us understand the relationships between the forest and its community?” I begin with a review of the assemblage theory and how it relates to human-environmental relationships. I also introduce a brief history of New England landscapes. Drawing on mixed qualitative research methods, I investigate how people interact with town forests, and what the forests mean to community members. I apply assemblage theory in my analysis, asking if it aligns with how local residents interact with town forests. The analysis suggests that a modified definition of assemblage theory could further everyday understandings of human-environment relations.

### **Theoretical Framework and Previous Works**

This section will cover assemblage theory, how it can be applied in environmental contexts, a background on New England settler landscapes, and the gaps in scholarship this study aims to fill.

#### **I. Assemblage Background**

The two town forests included in this study consist of complex parts and relationships. Like other natural spaces, the “natural” part comes from ecological processes and dynamics. For example, the soil composition of a section of forest is an important part of determining what trees or plants grow there, like in Maple Shade Town Forest, the thick hemlock groves beyond the initial stone wall prefer well-drained acidic soil of slopes. However, town forests, by definition, have some sort of human influence, sometimes extending to the makeup of trees. According to the Maple Shade management plan and oral history of Catamount, both forests have a history direct forest management in planting and culling trees aimed at producing more sugar maples or hardwood for a woodlot.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Maple Shade Town Forest, the hemlocks would not have been able to grow and dominate the section beyond the stone wall had the land managers not decided to stop selecting sugar maples. This direct human-nature interplay is illustrative of a deep interconnected relationship between the ecosystem and human desires and development. In addition to the ecological and human-natural interactions, town forests also contain intra-human dynamics that affect the way the landscape develops. At Catamount, there are many athletic clubs and organizations that use the trails, from the Mansfield Nordic Club to the Eastern Collegiate Cycling Conference (ECCC). The movement of these clubs made up of individuals along the trail network of the land also impacts wildlife patterns; small animals like rabbits and chipmunks likely choosing to avoid sections of the trail with dozens of humans running or cycling past and those trails serving as paths for larger animals like deer.<sup>2</sup> The system of interactions between agents and bodies, both human and non-human, ends up defining a town

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<sup>1</sup> “WTL-Long-Term-Management-Plan-2019.Pdf,” 7, accessed February 19, 2025, <https://westfordvt.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WTL-Long-Term-Management-Plan-2019.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Jesse S. Lewis et al., “Human Activity Influences Wildlife Populations and Activity Patterns: Implications for Spatial and Temporal Refuges,” *Ecosphere* 12, no. 5 (May 2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ecs2.3487>.

forest's identity. Assemblage theory in this context seeks to include human actions within the same system as the non-human world, rather than two separate spheres that occasionally interact.

Benedictus de Spinoza, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Jewish-Portuguese philosopher, examined the fundamental make-up of the universe in *Ethics*. In his view, the world is made up of “bodies” that act based on their “affect.”<sup>3</sup> Philosopher Jane Bennett’s analysis and application of Spinoza’s postulations made his definitions and axioms more digestible and applicable to this case. According to her, the bodies from *Ethics* are social and associative; their most defining characteristics are their interactions. She says that one of these actors “is, by its very nature as a body, continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies.”<sup>4</sup> In this she ascribes constant movement and relationships as key facets of the world and bodies therein. These bodies seek to persist. Spinoza called this impulse or urge to replicate itself, *conatus*. In Spinoza’s view, all objects and things are made of a common “substance,” and everything is a modification of that substance.<sup>5</sup> Any one of these affective bodies is, “itself a mosaic or assemblage of many simple bodies.”<sup>6</sup> Each body and mode, conative, seeks constant reiteration. For more complex mosaics or assemblages, this requires a “continual invention: because each mode suffers the actions on it by other modes, actions that disrupt the relation of movement and rest characterizing each mode.”<sup>7</sup> The process of constant action, reaction, and adaptation centers relationships between modes as the defining traits of bodies and systems. This characterization emphasizes the importance of assemblage among bodies. To survive, conative substance constantly forms alliances and joins networks. According to Bennett’s analysis of *Ethics*, the more bodies with which a body can affiliate, the stronger it will be.<sup>8</sup> The lesson to be learned from Spinoza’s writings, Bennett argues, is that “bodies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*,” which distributes “agency,” or the power to act, across a wide range of parts instead of “localized in a human body or in a collective effort produced (only) by human efforts.”<sup>9</sup>

The term assemblage comes from a translation of the term used by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *agencement*.<sup>10</sup> The defining characteristic of this theoretical approach is flux, change, and instability. Basing their approach to assemblages on the idea of a “multiplicity,” Deleuze and Guattari define the multiplicity as a whole network without the explicit idea of the network or the “one.”<sup>11</sup> As a multiplicity broadens and incorporates more actors and relationships it grows stronger and contains more energy, this view is in line with

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict de Spinoza and George Eliot, *Spinoza’s Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 163, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvkwnqjz>.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>5</sup> de Spinoza and Eliot, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Bennett, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota, 1987), 10 This citation includes the translated English language version.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 6.

Spinoza and Bennett's.<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari say: "[a]n assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its conditions. There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines."<sup>13</sup> Their analysis focuses on decentering the individual network and exalting the relationships and connections between entities that make it up. This stems from their position that multiplicities are *flat*. Authority, control, or identity does not flow down from the network, or up from its constituent parts. Its energy is evenly distributed across the relationships and actors that define it. It follows that "[p]erhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entries," further emphasizing its defiance of any efforts to define it.<sup>14</sup> This will become important in later discussions of how people interact with town forests and explains how different people experience different things in the same assemblage. An essential element of assemblages is their shifting dynamics, never static. As philosopher Manuel DeLanda explains, the English word "assemblage" leaves out the action inherent to *agencement*, so we need to be clear that the networks we are talking about are not one thing, they are always changing. In fact, each composite part of an assemblage is usually itself an assemblage, leading to "assemblages of assemblages."<sup>15</sup> Possessing an understanding of the complexity and agency an assemblage contains, we can assess to what extent human-centric analyses of phenomena are valid, especially where non-human actors are involved.

Jane Bennett uses the example of a widespread blackout to illustrate her perspective on distributive agency. The case at hand, a 2003 blackout affecting the United States and Canada, has direct, easy-to-visualize, human effects. The lights went out. It is easy to trace the source of the blackout to human error or oversight, but Bennett emphasizes the number of non-human actors. "To the vital materialist, the electrical grid is better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood—to name just some of the actants."<sup>16</sup> It will suffice to say that a purely human agency-driven analysis will leave a lot to be desired. Humans cannot directly control economic theory, electron streams or profit motives, and to think that we do is evidence of our fantasies of mastery. Electricity, according to Bennett, is capable of theorist Bruno Latour's "slight surprise of action" which, in the blackout example, was responsible for an unplanned directional shift within the grid that took the flow on a different path from source to target.<sup>17</sup> This network-wide combination of factors teaches us that agency, as Bennett puts it, is "distributed across a continuum, it extrudes from many loci..." meaning overconfidence in or blaming of human-created systems cannot capture the true multiplicity of causes.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that this study of

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 8 Deleuze and Guattari use the idea of a "rhizome" as a stand-in for multiplicity, or many. This contrasts with the "tree" or "root" whose identity is bound up in a discreet entity; a "One."

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1–3.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Bennett, 28.

town forests should not focus solely on human actions, rather approach forests as complete entities with agency. They create and possess their own agency that interacts with human agency to create a system-wide effect. Given how most people are taught, it can still be easier to think in terms of specific actors who are directly identifiable with a certain action rather than treat every action as a collective movement.

Bruno Latour understands the collective distributive agency behind what seem to be individuals' actions. Rather than seeing the actor as the "source of an action" as is typical, Latour calls an actor "the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it."<sup>19</sup> He uses as an example an actor (a performer on stage or screen). They are seemingly acting, or producing an effect, but it is impossible to separate their performance from that of their fellow actors, or the lighting, script, or effects. Latour's analysis comes down to forces beyond the immediate influence of an actor contributing to a combined action or force that moves *through*, not from, an actor. This helps us keep in mind the assemblage-wide agency while still acknowledging individuals' actions. In the example of managing a forest for sugar production, the forester still acts, but carries through themselves the economic incentives of sugaring, the historical practices contained therein, *and* their own individual agency.

## II. Environmental Applications

Distributive agency explicitly decenters the dominant human perspective while still acknowledging their influence. The word "environment" flies in the face of the idea of networks and assemblages. How, if we accept the premise that we are a *part of* and not *apart from* all actors with which we interact, be they human or non-human, can we call something our "environment?" We cannot. I will be using the designation "environmental" to refer to non-human actors, specifically things like forests, trees, rocks, soil, etc. I want to make clear that "environment" or "natural" are used throughout this paper because that is how the non-human world is commonly understood within Western modes of thought. It is not directly representative of the relationships and interactions between human and non-human actors.

Anna Tsing, a cultural anthropologist and philosopher, helps elucidate this distinction in the introduction of her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Many of us see nature as something separate from us, from humans. This idea is of Western Enlightenment origin. Tsing writes:

Ever since the Enlightenment, Western philosophers have shown us a Nature that is grand and universal but also passive and mechanical. Nature was a backdrop and resource for the moral intentionality of Man, which could tame and master Nature. It was left to fabulists, including non-Western and non-civilizational storytellers, to remind us of the lively activities of all beings, human and non-human.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), vii.

This perspective, as Tsing makes clear, relegated non-Western or European worldviews on what it means to relate to nature to a subordinate position to the rational, scientific process favored by economic and colonial powers. It also paints a false picture of what types of relationships exist or are possible between humans and Nature.<sup>21</sup> This separation between humans and non-humans is generally inconsistent with the historical realities of what we consider to be untouched wilderness. Wilderness is, as historian William Cronon writes, “profoundly a human creation.”<sup>22</sup> He argues that wilderness is a manufactured product of our existing damaging relations to the natural world, that we wrongly view as the solution. This is an instance where we can situate the natural world within assemblage theory. Humans and environment are inextricably linked, tied together by their relationships, stretching back tens of thousands of years. To understand assemblage theory’s connection to the environmental relationships humans build, we must view the world with an understanding of nature that emphasizes the importance and inextricability of human and non-human relationships. Conflict between humans and nature is a central component of Western historiography and culture, including that of the United States. In reality, it is impossible to separate these human societies from the nonhuman world that provided them with resources and opportunity to develop in such ways. In Europe, evidence suggests that humans affected forests in both the amount of tree or forest cover to make room for agricultural production and species composition as they selectively culled and planted trees.<sup>23</sup> The natural environment has affected human development and, in turn, been changed by people throughout human history.

At times, the intercession of human activity in natural landscapes can even be beneficial or essential for certain species. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) describes an amalgamation of many different Indigenous worldviews on how to understand ecology. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a PhD botanist and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, offers a dual perspective on environmental interaction, situating it simultaneously within scientific and traditional ecological knowledge. In conversation about sweetgrass, a traditional material for many Indigenous basket-weaving practices, she describes the “Honorable Harvest.”<sup>24</sup> In this method, someone harvesting sweetgrass will never take more than half of the available stems. The sweetgrass then will grow even more shoots than before, providing more material to basket weavers. The scientific explanation is that it is a biological response in which the plant produces more to account for perceived damage. The Potawatomi TEK explanation recognizes the agency of the natural world, that “[i]f we respect a plant and use it well, it will stay with us and flourish.

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<sup>21</sup> The capital letter “N” is used to denote an environment that possesses agency. When we use the capital letter we give it a name, treat it like a proper noun, and acknowledge its agency, shrinking the instinctual mental distance between Nature and humans.

<sup>22</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7.

<sup>23</sup> Eva Ritter, “Forests in Landscapes - The Myth of Untouched Wilderness,” in *New Perspectives on People and Forests*, ed. Eva Ritter and Dainis Dauksta (Springer Netherlands, 2011), 24.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Mishkosh Kenomagwen, the Lessons of Grass: Restoring Reciprocity with the Good Green Earth,” in *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability*, ed. Melissa K. Nelson and Daniel Shilling (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36.

If we disrespect or ignore it, it will go away.”<sup>25</sup> Both the scientific and traditional explanations of this phenomenon are valid in Kimmerer’s view. There is, no matter which answer one prefers, an undeniable relationship between sweetgrass and its human harvesters.

Anna Tsing calls these relationships “entanglements.”<sup>26</sup> She acknowledges their ubiquity throughout human-environmental interactions and offers an analysis of modern ways of relating to nature. She uses environmental historian William Cronon’s repurposing of Marx’s terms, “first nature” and “second nature.” First nature is the sum of ecological relationships which includes human impact (inextricable), and second nature refers to how capitalism, the most recent theater of human-environment relations, impacts nature. She “offers ‘third nature,’ that is, what manages to live despite capitalism.”<sup>27</sup> Her book seeks to examine the extent of capitalist entanglements and relies on the theory of assemblages to frame her discussion.

We must bring to the conversation the inevitable effect of a fossil fuel-based capitalist profit-driven model for human economic development: climate change. Human-driven climate change is an existential threat that will affect humans and non-human communities globally. Political theorist William Connolly points to capitalism as an intensification of the existing interactions between humans and the environment. Placed in the context of our understanding of assemblages, the bodies of profit, economic theory, and industry have a, now outsized, influence on Natural bodies, shifting the identity of the assemblages.<sup>28</sup> Both Tsing and Connolly identify instability in these assemblages as potentially threatening. As Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines or on new lines.”<sup>29</sup> Tsing’s idea of “precarity,” and Connolly’s “fragility” each describe the capitalist interactions with nature in the current assemblage and threaten to unravel many composite parts of the natural world.<sup>30</sup> Connolly identifies too many examples of fragility to count. He combines the existential threat of climate apocalypse with the human activities that exacerbate it (fracking, oil drilling, car reliance, etc.), and then with the effects in natural communities, wetland destruction, species loss, all of which returns to the climate change feedback loop further endangering humans.<sup>31</sup> Tsing explores this world of fragility or precarity through the lens of a mushroom (the one at the end of the world), matsutake. Rather than a critique of contemporary political economy, she offers “the imaginative challenge of living without those handrails, which once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going.”<sup>32</sup> Matsutake is the perfect example of a “third nature,” the fungus thrives in open, disturbed areas, popping up in deforested areas, or other sites of environmental degradation. Its ecological niche supports tree growth and repopulates damaged areas with natural life. Of course

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<sup>25</sup> Kimmerer, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, vii.

<sup>27</sup> Tsing, viii.

<sup>28</sup> William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Duke University Press, 2013), 30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv123x75n>.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 31; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2.

it is not immune to the capitalist entanglements so common in modern environmental relationships. Matsutake is a gourmet product. A commodity. Foragers work independently to gather them and sell them for profit but are subject to the whims of a market that can often leave them in danger of economic hardship.<sup>33</sup> Matsutake is a fall fungus, Tsing cites several Japanese poems that capture the aura of the mushroom as it fits into seasonal change. If we view the coming climate disaster as the winter alluded to by matsutake's autumn appearance, the fungus becomes an even more compelling symbol.

The mushroom's story brings Tsing to that of the pine trees they live with, and from them to the nematodes that live within their bark which can cause environmental degradation when exported to Japan from America. This emphasizes the diversity of impacts, flows, and movement within an assemblage. Jane Bennett's quote (used earlier), "bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogenous assemblage," speaks to the impossible diversity of assemblages.<sup>34</sup> Tsing uses a different term to describe the diversity and seeming contradictions within assemblages: "polyphonic." She favors this framing because, like assemblages, it is easier to change, adapt, and evolve to meet changing conditions while retaining its self-repeating conatus. Polyphony evokes vocal imagery, overlapping sound that, whether they harmonize or clash, contribute to an overall song, the song of the assemblage. Of her practical goal she says, "[i]f we are interested in livability, impermanence, and emergence, we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages. Assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve: this *is* the story."<sup>35</sup> There are layers of history, social and economic systems, and human activity woven throughout the natural world. Changing our perception of these systems and reframing our understanding to one based on polyphonic assemblages is essential.

### III. New England Settler History

This study analyzes town forests as assemblages that include all manner of non-human and human actors. The town forests who are subjects of this research are located in New England, whose landscape history is bound up with colonial land appropriation, conflict with Indigenous peoples, and mixed common land use. Early on, the Western sense of separation from nature drove settlers' ideas about the people who already lived there. Historian Robert Berkhofer explains that settlers' initial perceptions of Indians were that they were creatures of the woods. The term "savage" was often paired with "wild," explicitly equating them with Wilderness. The settlers also "generally employed a variant of the Latin *sylvaticus*, meaning a forest inhabitant or man of the woods."<sup>36</sup> The attitude and philosophical distinctions between whites and Indigenous peoples began to manifest in the ecology of the landscape. Colonial land use carved human spaces out of natural spaces, leaving many remnants that emphasized the differences between human and environment, while still being inextricably linked to one another.

#### A. Landscape History

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<sup>33</sup> Tsing, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 158.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 13.

The impetus for European colonization of the Americas was economic opportunity and natural resource extraction, from New Spain to New England, the mercantilist European powers reaped the benefits of their colonies. Early settlers relied on European patronage and trade and looked to the land to earn money and help their settlements survive. William Cronon recounts that the colonists who lived in New England began to see their environment as something they needed to manage to survive, not just a list of things that could be exported back to the mother country. “Settlers had first to survive and prosper before they could sell commodities across the sea, and that meant understanding the land they lived in. By the time they did this, however, the land was already changing in response to that new understanding, creating a landscape different from the one that had been there before.”<sup>37</sup> The New World was abundant, seemingly untouched compared with the thickly settled and developed British Isles. The forests were full of trees (white pine especially drawing the attention of colonists who hoped to ship firewood back to Britain), the streams full of fish, and the skies full of birds.<sup>38</sup> This richness and diversity of life was something to be exploited, and so, in 17<sup>th</sup> century New England, landownership began to be the way by which one could extract the value the land possessed. Lockean property ideals meant one had to inhabit and *change* the land to have a claim to property over it. Indigenous land use, though it certainly affected the landscape (from controlled burns for forest management to agriculture), was not, in the eyes of the Europeans, enough to claim property due to its impermanence. Cronon writes, “Criticism of Indian ways of life was a near-constant element in early colonial writing, and in that criticism we may discover much about how colonists believed land should be used.”<sup>39</sup> Towns and permanent settlement were prerequisites for property rights. In assemblage language: European settlers favored systems that prioritized human dominance over Nature and looked down on what they saw as anarchic and barbaric practices. This desire for control and organization was “responsible for a host of changes in the New England landscape: the seemingly endless miles of fences, the silenced voices of the vanished wolves, the system of country roads, and the new fields filled with clover, grass, and buttercups.”<sup>40</sup> The effects of this change reverberate through New England even today.

New England’s forests, arguably the most iconic part of its landscape, underwent significant shifts in their composition and role on the land. The initial wave of settlers was, of course, followed by further development. The enclaves the colonists had carved out of a wooded landscape, ballooned to open land interrupted only by now-fragmented forest. “The lumber market mushroomed around 1800 with the rising demand for fuel, construction lumber, shipbuilding, and later ties and timber for railroad lines... [by 1880] up to 70 percent of the region’s land was ‘in farms’ except in the far north country and the Green and White

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<sup>37</sup> William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, 1983), 21–22.

<sup>38</sup> Cronon, 22–25.

<sup>39</sup> Cronon, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Cronon, 128.

Mountains.”<sup>41</sup> Economic factors including high labor costs, falling farm prices, and inability to implement newer technologies on New England’s rocky and uneven soil, led to a retreat from forest development. Large numbers of farms and orchards were abandoned and began to regrow into forests, and as industrial machinery took the place of beasts of burden, the need for pasture decreased and also led to the resurgence of young forests.<sup>42</sup> This early 20<sup>th</sup> century regrowth swallowed up structures and left residual evidence of farming littered throughout the forest today.

One of the most easily identifiable markers of the land’s history is a stone wall or stone fence. Basically synonymous with New England, farmers built the walls with stones that the land spat out with the frost every year. Unlike most fences designed to note boundary lines or keep out unwanted animals, Historian Mark Lapping writes, “stone walls served primarily as deposition of rocks and stones that were the result of farmland clearing.”<sup>43</sup> The strong resurgence of the forests left some of these walls deep in the woods, where, today, one might not expect to find evidence of human activity.

Other colonial-era forest uses include management for Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) in addition to personal woodlots, among these were apple orchards and sugarbushes (for maple syrup production). The apple varieties, aside from the native crabapple, were introduced by European settlers and quickly became a staple of a New England diet due to its ability to grow in New England’s poorer, rockier soil.<sup>44</sup> Maple syrup production, however, long predates European influence in North America. The Indigenous peoples of the region, including but not limited various tribes in the Iroquois Confederacy and the Abenaki, would manage sugarbushes to collect and boil sap for the sugar.<sup>45</sup> The adoption of these Indigenous techniques by European settlers indicates a complex land-use dynamic within the ecological and social assemblages, both groups affected the land in similar ways despite negative settler attitudes toward Native land management. The ecological and infrastructural makeup of New England contributes to its regional identity. The historical roots of the region flow from some of the first English settlers in the Americas through the American Revolution. The nexus for revolution and American Independence, the region earns social capital as the birthplace of the American identity. The supposed inhospitable nature of the land (ignoring, of course, longstanding domestication and settlement by Indigenous peoples like the Algonquians) further lent itself to the idea of a rugged, self-reliant New England that fascinated visitors and artists.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lloyd C. Irland, “New England Forests: Two Centuries of a Changing Landscape,” in *A Landscape History of New England*, ed. Blake W. Harrison and Richard W. Judd (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 57.

<sup>42</sup> Irland, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Mark B. Lapping, “Stone Walls, Woodlands, and Farm Buildings: Artifacts of New England’s Agrarian Past,” in *A Landscape History of New England*, ed. Blake Harrison and Richard W. Judd (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 130–31.

<sup>44</sup> Lapping, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Lapping, 134.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph A. Conforti, “Regional Identity and New England Landscapes,” in *A Landscape History of New England*, ed. Blake W. Harrison and Richard W. Judd (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 23.

The interconnected patchwork of fields and villages remains in today's New England landscape, the leftover stone fences, sugarbushes, and orchards do not sit idly decomposing. They are still such a strong representation of New England culture because landowners and residents often choose to maintain and manage their land in ways that accentuate these important features. Replicating and reproducing this landscape assemblage is the constant work of a proud owner of land with a stone wall or any other iconic markers. A paper by geographer Cheryl Morse and others investigates the role of "performing" landscapes in a Vermont-specific context. They say, "Performance takes place within multiple theaters: through scripted performances of rural culture in reenactments at historical museums or television shows, and also in specific embodied activities and competencies such as skiing, wood turning, or interacting with others in a country store."<sup>47</sup> Performing a landscape is rarely an intentional or disingenuous act, rather reflects the ideas people have about the way their land *should* look. The study's results indicated that most landowners did not work their land for economic benefits, but "exert the effort to clear their fields because they prefer the way it looks: it is an aesthetic choice, not an outcome of production."<sup>48</sup>

#### *B. Human Affective Connection to New England Landscape*

The ideal New England landscape is embedded in art, literature, and poetry from the region. From Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Frost, there is no shortage of writing concerning New Englanders' historic connection to their landscape. It is hard to quantify or measure degrees of *affective* connection to the woods but examining different ways people have connected to the woods can help. From walks in the woods, to birdsongs, to environmental education, these methods are ways that people can make meaningful connections between themselves and their forests.

The legacies of past land use that litter New England's fields and forests are not obvious markers. As environmental and cultural geography Kent C. Ryden writes in his book *Landscape with Figures: Nature and Culture in New England*, these specific markers suggest "the quiet and insistent power of the meanings that were lodged in this landscape for at least a few of its viewers."<sup>49</sup> These woods' connection to their community history is there and depending on who walks through them they may gather more or less information:

[The woods will] always be great places to take walks, but we can make those walks as simple or complicated as we want them to be, either enjoying our solitude in a clearly nonhumanized place or inviting the whole ghostly gang of implicit past residents to join us in a world that they had a fundamental hand in shaping — or both at once; and that commingling of the natural and the

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<sup>47</sup> Cheryl E. Morse et al., "Performing a New England Landscape: Viewing, Engaging, and Belonging," *Journal of Rural Studies* 36 (2014): 227. This paper leads with an introduction to a specific property with beautiful stone walls. This is the same property that Maple Shade Town Forest now occupies. The article was published before the forest was incorporated in 2018 and references town residents' sadness that the property would be subdivided and developed, a fear that will be addressed in later sections.

<sup>48</sup> Morse et al., 232.

<sup>49</sup> Kent Ryden, *Landscape With Figures: Nature and Culture in New England* (University of Iowa Press, 2001), 155.

cultural, of many simultaneous perspectives on and experiences in the landscape, it part of what makes the woods so fascinating.<sup>50</sup>

Ryden argues that investigation and full enjoyment of the woods “reveals to us a surrounding world of richness and complexity, of beauty and meaning, of time and memory. Not a bad vista at all.”<sup>51</sup> This illustration of the woods as a deep place, in which one can deeply immerse themselves fits within our understanding of town forests as assemblages. The relationship-based agency means different people will experience different things based on their own perspective and dynamics they play out within the woods.

Birdwatching is an activity that attracts many people to walk in forests. Professor of environmental literature, Terence Mosher, posits that birdsong is a defining characteristic of a walk through the woods. “Subtract birdsong [from northern forests],” he writes, “and we enact a boreal version of Rachel Carson’s sobering parable in the opening chapter of *Silent Spring*.”<sup>52</sup> Mosher argues that birdsongs provide a soundtrack to the foundational New England writings in Thoreau and Frost. One of his principal points, “[the music of birds] locates those who attend to it on the border between the human and natural worlds, where it is good for us to live.”<sup>53</sup> The New England landscape, defined as it is by succession of forests into now abandoned farms and fields, is rich with the music of birds. Mosher uses “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” by Frost:

The house had gone to bring again  
To the midnight sky a sunset glow  
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood  
Like a pistil after the petals go.

The barn opposed across the way,  
That would have joined the house in flame  
Had it been the will of the wind, was left  
To bear forsaken the place’s name.

No more it opened with all one end  
For teams that came by the stony road  
To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs  
And brush the mow with the summer load.  
The birds that came to it through the air  
At broken windows flew out and in,  
Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh

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<sup>50</sup> Ryden, 156–57.

<sup>51</sup> Ryden, 157.

<sup>52</sup> Terrence D. Mosher, “Music of the Northern Forest: Boreal Birdsong in Literature and on the Trail,” in *Nature and Culture in the Northern Forest*, ed. Pavel Cenkl (University of Iowa Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>53</sup> Mosher, 29.

From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,  
 And the aged elm, though touched with fire;  
 And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;  
 And the fence post carried a strand of wire.

For them there was really nothing sad.  
 But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,  
 One had to versed in country things  
 Not to believe the phoebes wept.<sup>54</sup>

This poem emphasizes the melancholic qualities of birdsong, while simultaneously acknowledging their unique human effects. People who birdwatch or swim in birdsong in the woods are, potentially unwittingly, following in the footsteps of Frost and Thoreau, engaging in a timeless song in a place whose history is present in every wood. It also is a manifestation of the polyphony advocated by Tsing. When we listen to birdsongs, including Frost's eastern phoebe, we are literally hearing the sounds of the past.

This longing attachment to place and history is passed down, both through the landscape and replicating its forms (as shown in Morse et al.), but also through place and education. Frost is a "poet of place," for New England; "the crux of [his] poetic meaning was found at the juncture between the woods and home; his sources were a lapsing subsistence farming tradition, with which he was intimate if not especially expert. His home fields were those of rural New England."<sup>55</sup> The article by professor of Scandinavian studies Kathleen Dana also analyzes Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's work. She places his work "at the treeline" emphasizing its conjunctive work between humans and nature. These poems work with an understanding of an intertwined human and natural, nearly blurring the distinction beyond recognition. "Reading a Sámi poem within its ecological context will yield far more when the daily life, the ritual context, the contours of the landscape are known."<sup>56</sup> These, Dana argues, are effective ways to understand the natural world. They also form a grey area between strictly natural (i.e. no humans) and a completely integrated human and non-human world which can be hard to understand for anyone who grew up in the former, which is most of us (i.e. polyphony and assemblage). "At the treeline" serves as a good model from which to work for an assemblage-driven understanding of human and non-human interactions. It emphasizes the perceived split between human and environment (since the treeline is the border between the field and forest)

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<sup>54</sup> The eastern phoebe is a species of bird common in New England agricultural landscapes. Robert Frost, *Robert Frost's Poems* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 225.

<sup>55</sup> Kathleen Osgood Dana, "Robert Frost in the Fields and Nils-Aslak Valkeapää at the Treeline: Ecological Knowledge Academic Learning at the Northern Forest Edge," in *Nature and Culture in the Northern Forest*, ed. Pavel Cenkl (University of Iowa Press, 2010), 65.

<sup>56</sup> Dana, 73.

but differs from a traditional Western understanding in its emphasis of the interwoven nature of the human-environmental relationship.

#### **IV. Gaps in the Research**

The existing scholarship provides us with a solid understanding of assemblage theory (via Bennett, Deleuze, etc.), how it interacts with the environment (via Tsing and others), the past and present of New England landscape ecology and history (via Cronon, Lapping, Morse, etc.), and the affective connection between New Englanders and their forests (via Ryden, Mosher, and Dana).

This paper will fill gaps in the existing research. The first, and most obvious, is the local application of this theory and history to two Vermont towns. There is no local case study in New England where polyphonic assemblage theory has yet been applied. Second, this study, since it includes both auto-ethnography and interviews, has a unique position within the community and lived experience of a forest-goer. I hope for this study to filter the nebulous concept of assemblages and apply it to New England and Vermont specifically. This practical application will also be useful, hopefully, to the towns themselves. It is unlikely that assemblage theory will ever be fully implemented in a capitalist society like the United States; however, this study can provide practical steps and understandings drawn from assemblage theory that can improve relations between humans and their environment on a local level.

#### **Context**

Let me introduce you to the two town forests by walking you through them.

##### **Catamount Community Forest**

I drive up the dusty dirt road, it is August. Governor Chittenden Road takes me up to the parking lot. Summer at Catamount makes me sweat. I step out of my car into the gravel parking lot; mine is rarely the only car in the lot. When I come in the morning my feet quickly get wet from the dew on the long grass. I shake off the caked mud from my hiking boots and lace them tightly. The shack known as “The Hub,” where a staff member checks visitors in and provides help on trail selection and equipment rentals, sits at the edge of the lot. As I start toward the tree line, I take a wider approach because my usual path is swampy from yesterday’s rain. The stalks of golden rod meet me at eye-level, their bright yellow flowers set apart from the straw-colored dying grasses that fill in gaps between flowers.

When I enter the forest, I climb the hill, the ground beneath my feet drying as I climb. The sun, shining from the east, warms my skin and dapples through the leaves. The shadows on the floor dance as a slight breeze rustles the branches of yellow birch and sugar maple. I am



following a wide path covered with grass and moss, save for a stripe of hardpack earth down the middle, where uncountable bike tires have been.

A flutter of wings erupts to my right from a low shrub. Two warblers shoot towards the border where the forest is split by a powerline. The familiar piercing siren call of the redwing black bird echoes back to me. As I walk further along, I turn down a narrower path where there is a large human-made obstacle: stones piled up for a bike to surmount. Walking around it, I step onto a decomposing log, my foot sinks into the rusty red interior, which is no doubt home to innumerable insects.

Two people on mountain bikes approach from behind me and stop to rest. They ask me what I am doing, as I am walking slowly and writing in my notebook. I tell them, “Just taking notes for a project.” They wish me well and I tell them to enjoy the day. They cycle down the path ahead of me, leading me to a large clearing. I emerge into the bright, hot sun, a huge powerline stretches from uphill to my right downhill to my left. The area has no plants taller than chest height, most of these being shrubs or tall field grasses and goldenrod. The noise is like a wall, a symphony of humming and whirring drones on and on—conversations I can’t understand.



I continue along the path back into the cool forest. The cacophony dampens and is replaced by sporadic chirps and calls. I turn onto a side path, hoping to find some wildlife which the bikes might otherwise scare away. I come to a dead tree; its branches tell a story of its past. The tree’s thick limbs shoot out almost horizontally about chest-height from the ground. The tree was not always surrounded by a forest, it used to stand alone: a wolf tree left in a pasture to shade cows or sheep. Still occupying a grand place in the clearing, it is a remnant. I hear a percussive drill. From around the backside of the tree hops a red-capped bird. A downy woodpecker flits up and down, rotating to get the best attack angle on any grubs who may be living there. The scars that dot the snag’s surface hint at the surgical processes of generations of these hunters.



Further down the path, I cross a stone fence. It has an opening here for the trail to pass. Tufts of orange pine needles poke from the many gaps, and lichens and moss coat the outer stones. I spot a tiny red-eft newt slither from the lowest rocks out into the ever-present blanket of fallen leaves and needles on the floor. This fence has been here for hundreds of years. Built along agricultural fields from the unending deluge of rocks the frost pushes up each year, this fence denotes the mixed land use history.

“The Catamount Community Forest occupies nearly 400 acres of field, forest, wetland, and stream on both sides of Governor Chittenden Rd. in Williston,” reads the forest’s management plan.<sup>57</sup> This contributes to a diverse patchwork of natural communities. Some of this land is hayed or is in varying stages of ecological succession, including a few ponds home to wood ducks and a number of birds. The rest “is a mosaic of forested natural communities that include northern hardwood, white pine, hemlock, red oak mixed with northern hardwood, and transition hardwoods. Catamount contains at least seven different natural communities and is an excellent example of a multiple-use working Vermont landscape.”<sup>58</sup> Before European settlement, the land was occupied and is still unceded by the Western Abenaki, who now live on the other side of an international, colonial border on reserves at Odanak and Wôlinak in what is now called Quebec, Canada.

Across the road from the Hub stands the Giles Chittenden house, now owned and inhabited by Lucy and Jim McCullough. The land’s post-settlement history begins with well-known figures in early Vermont history. Vermont’s first governor, Thomas Chittenden, who lends his name to the county the forest inhabits, built the house for his son Giles and the structure remains one of the oldest in the state. It is surrounded by several other buildings including an outhouse and sheep barn, all of which are on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>59</sup> Jim McCullough’s great-grandfather purchased the property in 1873 from his cousin. The land was then used as a dairy farm through 1954 and began to attract the attention of developers who wanted to subdivide the property. These advances were rebuffed by Jim McCullough’s mother who owned the land at the time.<sup>60</sup> The historical legacy of previous land use extends from the iconic house throughout the forests and fields,



Figure 1. 1993 Liz Pritchett

<sup>57</sup> “Catamount Community Forest Management Plan,” 17, accessed March 19, 2025, [https://www.town.williston.vt.us/vertical/sites/%7BF506B13C-605B-4878-8062-87E5927E49F0%7D/uploads/Catamount\\_Community\\_Forest\\_Plan\\_FINAL\\_ADOPTED.pdf](https://www.town.williston.vt.us/vertical/sites/%7BF506B13C-605B-4878-8062-87E5927E49F0%7D/uploads/Catamount_Community_Forest_Plan_FINAL_ADOPTED.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> “Catamount Community Forest Management Plan,” 17.

<sup>59</sup> National Register of Historic Places, “Giles Chittenden House” (State of Vermont, September 29, 1993), [https://accdservices.vermont.gov/ORCDocs/Williston\\_NationalRegister\\_NominationForm\\_00000001.pdf](https://accdservices.vermont.gov/ORCDocs/Williston_NationalRegister_NominationForm_00000001.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Lucy McCullough and Jim McCullough, McCullough Interview, February 18, 2025.

which “are still defined by old stone walls, mature plantings, and historic trails and roads.”<sup>61</sup>

The forest has been managed for recreation by the Catamount Outdoor Family Center (COFC), which was established by Jim and Lucy McCullough, starting in 1978 with cross-country ski trails. The McCullough’s tried several iterations of recreational infrastructure, from ice skating, to BMX, and the COFC still holds races and events of all kinds.

In 2018 a management plan was published by the town of Williston. They had ambitious goals for the forest, which had already been managed for ecological health, like wetland restoration, and recreation for decades. They wrote “The Town of Williston will manage the Property as a municipal forest for wildlife habitat, timber harvesting and management, public recreation, education, and water quality protection.”<sup>62</sup> These benefits would then be distributed to Vermont’s most densely populated region. Around a five-minute drive from the center of commercial life in Williston the forest would serve the 9,400 people who live there, in addition to “the 125,000 people in neighboring towns who live within a 20 minute drive of the property.”<sup>63</sup> This new acquisition guarantees this space as public natural land. The property is still managed by the COFC and the community around it still thrives.

### **Maple Shade Town Forest**

A 20-minute drive and 2 months later, I walk you through Maple Shade Town Forest. Fall in Westford feels like you might imagine. It is late October, as I step out of the car, I pull off my fleece, the sun is warming the Westford Elementary parking lot. I can hear the yells of children during their recess. I start across the road to start of the town land. As I come over the top of the first hill, the wide field between myself and the trailhead widens. The low stone wall to my left is bordered by large maple trees, their yellow leaves and wide trunks form boundary between myself and the farmland. Ahead of me the grass is littered with small, dried leaves. As I step, they cave in on themselves with a crunch.

Following the path along the edge of the grassy expanse, I find myself sharing my trip with a wall. The stone wall follows me. The long flat stones (there must be thousands in the whole length) are stacked with care and clearly demarcate the divide between the mowed field and the hemlock wood that lies beyond it. There is a story I have heard about this wall that implicates post-Revolutionary War actors.

Some of the Hessians, German mercenaries fighting for the British and French over the colonial wars of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, are supposed to have stayed on in numbers. This wall has been attributed to a labor force of these Hessians who, using oxen and carts, completed a number of



<sup>61</sup> National Register of Historic Places, “Giles Chittenden House,” sec. 7 pg. 11.

<sup>62</sup> “Catamount Community Forest Management Plan,” 3.

<sup>63</sup> “Catamount Community Forest Management Plan,” 4.

construction projects, maybe including this stone wall. Rounding a bend, I walk toward the trailhead, the field on my right.

I see a man in the field with headphones and a metal detector near the opposite edge of the grassy expanse. I don't try to greet him; he is too far away and clearly focused on his task. Crossing a small bridge I arrive at the real trailhead a quarter mile into my walk. Posted at the kiosk there are many signs ranging from warnings about ticks, to a trail map, to a certification that this land is conserved by Vermont Land Trust (VLT). There is also a warning that hunting is allowed on this land. It is deer season for archers, and I had no idea. There are chip-clips attached to the sign with four orange vests; one of which I gratefully put on.



I walk further along and into the woods where the temperature drops, and I have to put my fleece back on. My feet make a racket as I tread on the downed leaves. Ahead of me, a family of turkeys pipe up and clear off the trail. They skirt the trail and disappear into the turkey-colored underlayer of the hemlocks. I walk towards the beaver pond and soon the sun hits me again. The dense canopy gives way to blue sky save for some small thin trees. This area has been logged. I pass one of the remaining trees and it has a massive blue "L" spray painted onto it. This stands for "Legacy," to be left alone. The area is dominated now by young trees, shrubs, and some grasses. The last of the fiddlehead ferns for the year are curled up and brown. Passing through this open part of the forest, I am surrounded by songs whose singers, no doubt, are spending time in the bushes eating before they migrate south for the winter. I pass back into the shade and darkness of a lower area where the trees are mostly evergreen. The soil is dark and rich, and fallen hemlock branches crisscross each other just off the trail. Further down into this hollow my steps sink into something soft. Moss has reached across this section of trail. Light green and faintly yellow, the delicate plants must not be stepped on that often for them to be here.



I pass along and climb back up to a wide-open area. The dry ground is covered with old brown needles, and I find my footholds on knobby roots. Stepping out into the light I see a large, still body of water. Scraggly trees reach out from the forest edge, and dead tree stumps emerge from the water. I do not see a beaver, but a large wooden pile near the middle of the water is irrefutable evidence.

The land on which MSTF now sits was never owned by a Governor’s son, but a small-hold farmer, like so many in New England. A grant written by Patrick and Amber Haller, who live next-door to the property, applied for funds to help restore the old barn on the farm and provides some background historical context for the property. The farm was founded c. 1837 by Mr. Jackson and Miss Hazelton and became known as the “Maple Shade Farm,” later giving its name to the town forest. It was primarily a dairy farm, but the owners were also sugar makers who sold to the Boston market. The owners built a wood mill in the 1950s which still stands in the field, visible from the road.<sup>64</sup> The landscape history of the property is visible through a few markers. Within the woods you can still find remnants of barbed wire and sugar maple trees, indicating a mixed use, with the space between trees used as pasture for cows.<sup>65</sup>



2018 saw the acquisition of the land by the town. The management plan outlines its goals, as protecting ecological health, facilitating recreation while minimizing effects on ecology, promoting community and school connections through education and volunteering, and implementing hunting that has minimal negative effects on wildlife and the nearby school.<sup>66</sup> Westford’s population is much smaller than Williston’s, about 2,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and so its forest is far less busy.<sup>67</sup> The forest focuses more on localized benefits to the immediate community, like safe and limited hunting and access to educational opportunities for community members and schoolchildren.



### Methods

This project employed multiple methods: auto-ethnography, field notes, walking interviews with regular forest visitors, and online community surveys. This project received IRB approval. The survey results were completely anonymous unless a participant chose to self-identify and submit their contact information to participate in an interview. Interviewees were given pseudonyms, to which I will be attributing all quotes in the Findings section, and their data kept separate from any identifying information.

#### Survey:

<sup>64</sup> Patrick Haller and Amber Haller, “Jackson Farm Barn Preservation Grant Application” (Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, 2020), 2, [https://accdservices.vermont.gov/ORCDocs/Chittenden\\_ProjectFile\\_BG-21-0039\\_ApplicantSubmittal-DivisionResponse\\_94879-2299.pdf](https://accdservices.vermont.gov/ORCDocs/Chittenden_ProjectFile_BG-21-0039_ApplicantSubmittal-DivisionResponse_94879-2299.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> “WTL-Long-Term-Management-Plan-2019.Pdf,” 7.

<sup>66</sup> “WTL-Long-Term-Management-Plan-2019.Pdf,” 18–21.

<sup>67</sup> US Census Bureau, “City and Town Population Totals: 2020-2023,” Census.gov, accessed May 6, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-total-cities-and-towns.html>.

The surveys were designed to get a general understanding of the local communities' relations to the forests and were not targeted specifically at regular forest users. Though, people who responded to the surveys were more likely to be forest users. Taking the initiative to fill out such a survey may indicate some stake or interest in the forest. The surveys were designed to take 5-10 minutes, though that number was heavily dependent on the amount of writing each person put into their responses. The surveys had branching questions, so if, for example, somebody said they did not spend time in Catamount or Maple Shade Forest they would not be prompted to say what they do in the forest or why they choose to spend time there. There were ten possible questions to answer, followed by demographic questions and a question where you can opt-in to participate in an interview.

An example question: "To you what is/are the most important function(s) of a town forest? (Select all that Apply). Answer Options: Recreation; Ecological Conservation; Natural Resources (e.g. logging); Historical Value; Spiritual Value; Other."

The surveys were distributed via Front Porch Forum, a community information network popular in Vermont. They were each posted by UVM professors who have access to the Front Porch Forum in their respective towns. The survey was available for two weeks at a time. I asked my distributors to repost it once, two weeks in. For Catamount, this yielded about 20 more responses, but for Maple Shade there were no more responses. There is a list of the questions in the appendix, as well as the message that was attached to the posts on the Forum.

#### Interviews:

The interview participants were drawn from a few different sources. At Catamount, I already knew some people I was confident would want to interview and so I reached out to them first. At Maple Shade, Cheryl Morse, my advisor, recommended someone to speak to initially. Following these interviews I asked them if they knew anybody else who might want to be interested. Using this "snowball method" I was able to find more people to interview. The rest of my interviewees were filled out by those who opted in via the survey. I chose these people based on their interest level and ability to meet and walk with me. At Catamount, I chose one person from these opt-ins and at Maple Shade I chose two. I had four interviews at CCF and six at Maple Shade.

These were walking interviews, meaning no matter the weather we would plan to walk, how far we got or how long we walked for depended on the person and the conditions. We would always start in the parking lot where we had both left our cars, and then I would ask where they would usually walk. In Catamount, this had more impact because there are so many more trails, especially from the parking lot. In Maple Shade, we always had to walk along the initial trail to get to the kiosk, by which point our conversation would have started.

While I had some prepared questions, these were largely informal interviews, as was my goal. An example question that I might lead off with is "Tell me why you choose this forest instead of some other state land, or your own private land." This usually established my interviewees perspective and allowed me to then dive deeper in improvised questions based on their responses.

Since I wanted to capture what it was like to walk through these woods with somebody under normal circumstances, I didn't want the interviews to feel overly professional or restrictive. To this end, one of the most effective questions was "Please tell me a story about a time that you spent in the forest that you found valuable." This led to vastly different content in each interview. Some people spoke more about the logistic and financial difficulties or processes involved in the forests, while others spoke more about their personal experiences and how the woods *feel*. This was exactly the goal of mobile methods. I wanted to experience the places from the interviewees' perspective. The nature of assemblages is based on relationships and not discreet entities. This means that each person will experience the woods in a vastly different way based on their own relations to certain aspects of it. As geographer Hannah Macpherson writes, "walking and walker's bodies bring with them their own politics, cultures, histories, habitual responses and lived experiences that must be taken into account."<sup>68</sup> This window into the world of the interviewee emphasizes the difference in perspective one can have based on whom they walk with, what the weather is like, or any other number of factors. This can help especially in working through an assemblage framework. Assemblages have multiple points of entry and thus exploring as many of those entry points in the town forests as I could was helpful in painting a complete picture of the place.

An example of this is the way and time of year that we walked through the woods. My first interview was in September at CCF, it was warm and sunny. The person I was walking with was also older, and I knew she had mobility challenges as she had just had hip surgery some time before that. This necessarily meant a slower pace of walking, something neither of us minded given the weather. This slow pace freed up our minds and eyes to wander a bit more, and during this interview we stopped regularly to marvel at some small plant or take a cool photograph. Contrast this interview with one of my more recent ones that took place in late January in Maple Shade. It had snowed a foot of fresh snow by the time that we both arrived at the parking lot, I could barely go twenty miles per hour down the dirt road on the way there. He brought his dog, and I knew him to be an active skier and hiker. This meant he was moving a lot faster than other interviewees. We were also trudging through the snow being tugged along by his dog, Reese, adding to our haste. We had our slow moments, particularly stopping at the beaver pond to marvel and take photos. But for the most part, we were moving for most of the hour-long interview. Each of these interviews were very different experiences because the people I was walking with interacted with their forest in different ways.

*Ethnographic Field Notes:*

To try to discover how *I* interacted with these forests, a part of my methods was auto-ethnographic field notes. Ethnographic field notes are "observational/participatory," and situate the researcher in the *place* they are studying.<sup>69</sup> This helps eliminate the distance between researcher and subject that can make it difficult to understand more emotional or spiritual

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<sup>68</sup> Hannah Macpherson, "Walking Methods in Landscape Research: Moving Bodies, Spaces of Disclosure and Rapport," *Landscape Research* 41, no. 4 (2016): 426.

<sup>69</sup> Meghan Cope and Iain Hay, "Where Are We Now? Qualitative Research in Human Geography," in *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 8.

connections to place. In my case, I visited each forest every two weeks from September through January, no matter the weather, and tried to experience it as if I was out on a walk, no analysis, just observations. This included taking photos (many of which are included in the introductory section) and writing down things I see in my notebook. If I noticed an animal, I wrote it down, or if I was struck and decided to write some bad poetry, I did. These are all things I would notice if I were not studying the forest and only spending time in nature; this makes the field notes a valuable resource to help build my own sense of the place. As the year progressed, I took sparser notes and photos, the cold weather discouraging my hands from leaving their mittens or pockets.

Analysis:

I coded these results using a system that developed over time. I read a few interviews first and grouped quotes by theme. For example, ecological protection and social protection from development were early themes. I would then run later interviews through this codebook, assigning new quotes to the themes, and adding new themes as needed. I eventually grouped these smaller themes into larger categories. For example, access to the school and the summer camp system, which were separate themes, became one larger theme: future generations. These themes became subsections within the findings.

I combined this existing codebook with the survey responses, which, while less detailed, provided general data that made me more able to understand general trends. There were some things mentioned in one or two of the interviews that were not reflected at all in the surveys. This served as a check on what was representative of the community's opinion, and every finding ended up being mentioned in both interviews and surveys.

I drew primarily on the interviews in my writing process, supplementing in a couple places with particularly striking quotes from the survey. The survey responses provided me with a backdrop and general community perspective, while the interviews gave more detailed individual experiences which can be situated within the larger town forest community.

Limitations:

The primary limitations to this study are that the people most likely to be surveyed/interviewed were already in favor of the town forest. The survey, though distributed to everyone via Front Porch Forum, was mostly answered by those who knew the forest well. Interviews especially had this pitfall, people who were interviewed self-selected and were likely regular users. While this helped give an ethnographic approach that emphasized individuals' experiences within the forests, it did not lead to a diversity of opinion on whether the forests were important parts of the community, as the forests were important parts of their own lives. However, there was diversity in terms of what the town forests meant to the communities.

Additionally, assessing the forests' agency and perspective in as much depth as the human dimension is something that merits further study, and this project was not able to. My interest in the human communities that surround the forest carries my analysis largely into the human sphere, while leaving the natural perspective under-analyzed.

## Findings

The findings from this study demonstrate Westford and Williston residents' complex, and occasionally, contradictory relationships with their forests. Town residents value the forests in different ways and for different reasons. My results are divided into three primary sections, each divided into subsections, which draw on both survey and interview content. They help explain Vermonters' connection to their public forests and answer my first research question: "What meaning do town forests hold for their communities?"

### I. Survey

#### A. *Survey Participant Demographics:*

The Williston survey received 79 total responses, while the Westford survey received 42. Survey respondents from both communities -- Williston and Westford-- ranged in age from 25 to over 65. The largest age group represented was 65+ (38 in CCF; 19 in MSTF), each nearly double the size of the next most represented group. Most respondents identified as women (57% in CCF; 61% in MSTF), one respondent in CCF identified as "other." All respondents from Westford who chose to answer this question identified as "White/Caucasian." All but two respondents from Williston identified as "White/Caucasian," one identified as "Hispanic" and the other as both "White/Caucasian" and "Asian or Pacific Islander."

#### B. *Survey Results:*

In Westford, 86% of respondents reported spending time or recreating in their forest, while 78% in Williston did. Most respondents indicated that they love to walk in the forest, birdwatching / "enjoying nature" was the second most common result between the two forests. In Williston, though, many people also indicated that they enjoy biking in the woods, far more than in Westford. When asked why they choose to spend time in CCF or MSTF, many people said that the convenience of their locations and were big draws. In Williston, 24% of respondents said some variation of "close to home" as primary reasons they spend so much time there. In Westford, the most common response was that the forest is quiet or that not many people are there (20%), though many responses also included "close to home" as important factors.

The next important question to look at is "Did you vote for the creation of this forest?" and "If yes: why?" This lets us get a sense of what role the respondents think a town forest *should* play in their communities. In both towns, the most common response was that conserving the land was important. Many pointed to the ecological benefits of such a space. "Every acre of forest and farmland that can be conserved must be, literally for the future of our planet (corny though that sounds it's true!), for our air, our climate, our children. There are still many of us who value the wilderness, and live here because we love it here. Our needs and opinions and love are equally valid to those who want to destroy and 'develop,'" said one respondent from Westford. A respondent from Williston said, "[s]o the property, which is small portion of a major natural wildlife corridor -- mostly privately owned, would not be parceled or developed, rather managed as a wild place -- for preservation of bird species, sustainable forestry, rewilding of plant communities, habitat for animals and humans...."

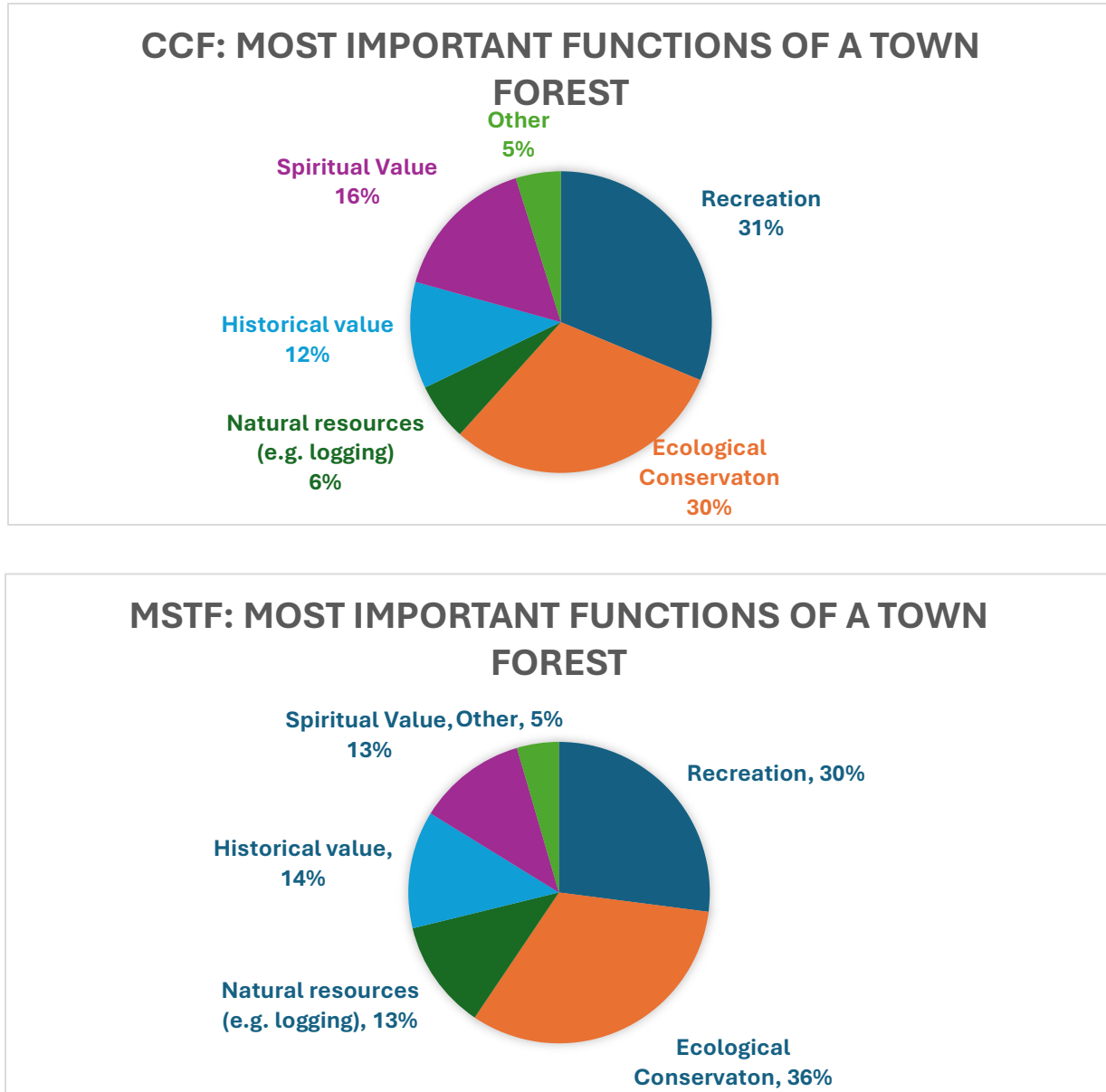


Figure 2

Another major factor in survey respondents’ “Yes” votes was that the town forest would serve as an asset to the town itself, somewhere for residents to recreate and spend time outside. One Westford respondent reflected this desire for accessibility, “to assure local availability to outdoor recreation for those who may not be able to travel to other areas.” A Williston respondent said, “I live in Williston and we need more outdoor space plus the property is beautiful and should be enjoyed by all.” Conservation of natural spaces, not just for human use, but non-human benefits, was a common sentiment among respondents.

Another question that provides insight into general attitudes in the town about the forests’ role was “To you what is/are the most important function(s) of a town forest?” Asked to select

all that apply to them, the results indicate remarkably similar priorities between the two towns. “Recreation” and “Ecological Conservation” were the most prevalent answers (30% and 36% respectively in MSTF; 31% and 30% respectively in CCF). This data gives us a general understanding of what these forests are meant to do, according to the residents of the towns.

*Interviewees:*

A total of ten people were interviewed for this project, four in CCF and six in MSTF, and one background interview was carried out with Lucy and Jim McCullough, who founded the Catamount Outdoor Family Center.

## **II. Main Findings**

### **A. Recreation, Natural Beauty, Solitude, and Spirituality:**

Recreation in these forests has been identified by the survey as a top priority for the towns’ residents. This is reflected in the interviews as well, as every interviewee regularly spends time in these woods. The recreation section will be divided into two sub-sections, Sports and Natural Beauty, Solitude, and Spirituality. Sporting will cover the nordic skiing, hiking, running, and biking activities that the forests facilitate. Natural Beauty, Solitude, and Spirituality indicate an affective component. Many people do not love these woods just because of their trail network, but because they find peace and enjoyment in observing the non-human communities therein.

#### *A. Sports*

Both forests support some measure of recreation, as covered in the forest context section, and many of the interviewees reported enjoying that aspect of their town lands. Maple Shade Town Forest has less developed recreation infrastructure than Catamount Community Forest, however MSTF and its sister forest, Misty Meadows Town Forest, both allow skiing and mountain biking.

Ron Harrity, a regular user of MSTF, says about his recreational time “I think my connection is. You know both very practical and it’s the way I get my exercise; it’s the way I exercise my dog.” On what he does in the forest, he said, “I hike, and I snowshoe, and sometimes get cross country skis out over in Misty Meadows.” As we learned in the survey, preserving access to this type of land is a prime motivation, since “most people don’t have the luxury of owning enough land to be able to [XC ski or snowshoe].” Greg Copeland spends a lot of time in Westford’s town lands, mostly on his bicycle. He told me about the “ancient roads” that criss-cross Vermont. These forgotten roads, he said “make incredibly good bike rides. There’s one that connects two sides of a hill, and it’s the Westford town roads on either end of this thing.” He loves that these roads let him travel long distances and explore.

Catamount Community Forest is built around recreation and boasts a massive trail network that is regularly groomed for Nordic skiing in the winter and maintained for biking and running in non-winter months. Catherine Stemler, who regularly mountain bikes, runs, and skis at CCF, said “over 25 years ago I learned to mountain bike with Lucy McCullough, the owner of Catamount, and her daughter taught a mountain bike clinic, and I’ve been mountain biking ever since.” Recreation is baked into the identity of the forest as it has been managed for recreation since the 1970s. Jacob Arthur, who is involved in the COFC, said that is by design, the woods

are meant to be “actively managed for recreation. It’s not a passive town forest...it’s meant to have camps, meant to have events, it’s meant to have races, meant to be more than just a town forest.” Arthur says this active evolution and trail reworking is in part due to the fact that CCF charges for access to skiers and bikers. “If we do continue to charge, the only things we can charge for are skiing and biking. So, we have to be better than the free trail networks that are all around us.” One person who benefits from this management and planning, even though she doesn’t bike or ski, is Lauren Anthony. She is a regular walker and, as she struggles with mobility on some harder terrain, appreciates CCF’s trail offerings. “It has so much to offer in terms of the types of trails,” she said, “depending on how much I feel I want to push myself; it’s just the right amount on the trails.” Access to recreation at any confidence level is a key part of the benefits forest users signaled.

*B. Natural Beauty, Spirituality, and Solitude*

Along with sports like skiing and biking, these town forests serve as spaces in which people can connect to and engage with the non-human world, and many appreciate the peace that comes with getting away from other humans.

Karen Thompson, a regular user of MSTF, says she finds peace on a specific trail in the woods. “In the summertime this whole trail is moss-covered. There’s a stream that runs along the trail so, hearing the noise of the stream while you’re walking it really peaceful...it feels like you’re in like a little magical Wonderland.” Peter Holden said the woods are a special place to him, “Being here in the woods,” he said “is also kind of a spiritual thing for me. A place for my soul to get out of the chaos and just getting through the woods.” Many pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as the impetus that established the importance of time spent outdoors and spaces to lose oneself. Jane Archer said:

At the height of the pandemic, I would come and cross-country ski across the street once a week. It was one of the few times, you know, I ever got out of the house, and it was really important. To my well-being at that time because you remember that everyone was stuck at home. It's not great. And I've also really, really enjoyed getting to know the woods over the years.

Others at MSTF echoed the sentiment that isolation led to an increase in their time spent outside and appreciation for their local natural spaces. Peter Holden said, “COVID showed that we all need to get out, get in the woods and enjoy nature.” Greg Copeland said that the pandemic “prompted [him] to do a lot more serious exploring on a bicycle than [he] had done before.”

Forest users at CCF also deeply connect to the natural world through finding peace in the woods. Catherine Stemler said “I love just getting in the woods away from everything. I mean I was out here last night skiing for an hour and a half. I saw two people. And it was just, you know, it was all this new snow. Just it's magical... it's part of my mental health.” Lauren Anthony told me, “Mostly you can just be out, even with all the biking and racing stuff that goes on. You can just get out here and all the quiet except for the birds. I can’t even really hear the

highway at the moment."<sup>70</sup> She recounted how her experience in the forest reminds her of her childhood:

Growing up, we had a maple tree and an elm tree in our front yard, back then elms were all over the place. I would get up inside this maple tree and it was like nobody could see me. I loved just sitting in that tree and just getting to be there with the beautiful maple tree. It's the same kind of feeling I feel in Catamount...people have all kinds of ways of getting in touch with their spirituality. This is how I do it.

Anthony loves taking her time through the woods and taking photographs, drawing them later, "I come out here and explore, explore and explore. And I take lots of photos and then do some artwork from some of my photos. And yeah, I'm just addicted." During our walking interview, Anthony and I stopped regularly to take these photographs and chat about how cute that mushroom is, or how cool it is that the barbed wire still pokes through this old stump. Slowing down and relishing the details are an important part of how Lauren Anthony connects to this forest. She said that the photos she takes and drawings she creates give her a piece of the forest to take home with her even when she isn't walking.

#### **B. Preservation:**

Research participants articulated a desire to protect town forests. The interviews yielded three main findings within this theme, which align broadly with the survey responses. First, ecological conservation: in the face of the climate crisis, interviewees indicated a desire to maintain these lands as a "wild" space, contrasted with the environmental degradation so commonplace worldwide. Second, historic preservation: the town forests are clear reflections of an ideal landscape, the stone walls of MSTF and Giles Chittenden Homestead of CCF are markers of Vermont's history. Third, preservation of a unique Vermont identity: the former two desires combine to make up the New England landscape and maintaining that aesthetic, in addition to the small-town culture and community of Westford and Williston, was a clear priority. The interconnected nature of community identity with the history and ecology of Vermont leads these themes to bleed together in places and present a complex network.

##### *A. Ecological Conservation*

A common way that some interviewees reported interacting with the non-human world is through attention to and identification of flora and fauna. They often have the Merlin app open on their phone to identify birdsongs, and they told me many stories about different animals they have seen while out walking.

In CCF, Mary Claire told me about the difference between even her backyard, just a few miles away, and the town forest. "We came for a walk here and it was so great. There were birds that I hadn't really seen or heard. I've always loved birds, and I can visually identify a lot of our New England birds, but I'm terrible with the songs, so the Merlin app was awesome." She also told me stories about encounters with deer and bobcats. "I've seen so many critters. Tons of deer,

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<sup>70</sup> Vermont Route Two and Interstate-89 are ½ miles from the southernmost trails as the crow flies.

especially when I come at twilight ski over on Sandman [a trail at CCF]. There's kind of a deer wintering yard over there, I think. You know, they'll go down and pass, 5 or 6 of them, and it's amazing. Really like breathtaking." She has spent enough time to identify a specific rock that she calls "Bobcat Poop Rock." She said, "I swear it sits there and just looks at the view because there's always poop right on this rock, it's hysterical." Greg Copeland, from MSTF, said, "I love checking, you know, what birds are around today? What are the leaves doing?" Noticing the little things has proved a strong way to connect to the forest. During our walking interviews, there were several times when we paused our questions to look at or listen to some animal. With Mary Claire, we stopped to look at a snow spider. We were there for a couple minutes trying to figure out how it wasn't frozen to death. We also stopped to discuss crows when we heard a murder caw-ing in the trees above us. In MSTF, Ron Harrity and I paused our conversation to look at what could have been a hawk or vulture (we never figured it out). These little instances of slowing our pace or stopping to think about the non-human actors surrounding us helped me to ground myself in the woods more completely.

The non-humans in the forests are fascinating to many people. When coupled with the recreational opportunities afforded by the woods, the forests become dear to their communities, and the communities showed a desire to preserve and protect them from perceived harm.

This love of nature has led many in Westford and Williston support the forests' status as ecologically protected areas. In the face of the climate crisis, people believe these forests are local ways to contribute to global conservation efforts. In CCF the presence of a dedicated natural area, especially in the face of the large-scale development common in Williston and other areas outside the more densely populated Burlington area, is important to provide that sense of natural beauty. In reference to Taft Corners, a large-scale shopping district nearby, Catherine Stemler said it is "a crazy Wonka doodle Mall, and it's what, three miles away? Keeping the open land and the beautiful space here is critical." In a similar vein, Mary Claire said, "there are a bunch of things here in Catamount that we don't get at my house, even though we live so close, just because, you know, the forest is different or the trees species or whatever it is." Both quotes refer to a natural *oasis* in the midst of suburban development. Not even being able to hear the highway, as Lauren Anthony's quote earlier goes, is an important part of finding a space for that natural beauty even when the surrounding areas are undergoing large development projects.

MSTF, situated in Westford, much farther from this concentration of development, is still seen by its human users as a place worth protecting as part of a larger Vermont and global ecosystem. When asked about what is so important about preserving this piece of land, Peter Holden, who was involved in the initiative to form the town forest, said "The unfragmented forest. For the animals that cruise up and down the spine of the Green Mountains. And as global warming continues, this is carbon sinking as we're walking here." Ron Harrity provided a story that began to sound alarm bells in his view of the environment. Having moved to Westford with his family from Colorado, he has seen other natural areas destroyed as a direct result of the climate crisis. "Fires just became an every-year occurrence, even multiple per year." He then recounted that he was hiking, and he could smell forest fires nearby, before he saw it emerging

over the ridge across from him. “I’ve seen smoke and flames shoot at fifty feet over this ridge...and that was for me, like, OK, it’s not going to get better. It’s only going to get worse, and that was one of the reasons we decided to move here.” Harrity and his family became climate refugees, and in Westford, he sees the value in conservation and combatting the crisis. “Climate change just seems like there’s nothing I can do. All I can do is stress about it. So to find something like [the positive ecological initiatives in MSTF] is important.” The specific forest management of MSTF also derives from this ecological mindset. Unlike Misty Meadows Town Forest (the sister forest across the road behind the elementary school) which has an extensive ski and bike trail network, the town wanted to leave “some not quite wilderness, but untouched...we didn’t want to fragment the forest more by having lots of trails,” Peter Holden said.

The forest management led by former Chittenden County Forester Ethan Tapper in both forests has sparked discussion around ecologically minded users of the forest in both positive and negative ways. In MSTF the practice of cutting trees has served as an example of sustainable forestry. Kristy Barret recounted a walk that Tapper led through the forest to show how cutting, for example, hemlocks in a densely populated area can lead to an explosion of maple growth from saplings that wouldn’t otherwise have gotten enough sunlight. The forest in Westford serves in an educational capacity, as Karen Thompson, who is involved with the forest’s conservation efforts, said about cutting trees, “we manage the forest, we take wood out that we need and also we can keep the forest healthy at the same time. So that was a perfect place to do that, to demonstrate all that stuff.” Similarly, in CCF, Tapper has talked with community members like Lauren Anthony, who takes an interest in the process of forest management. She said about what she has learned “[sustainable forestry] has its messes, but like Ethan says, these messes are what feeds everything in the earth.” The debris and branches from logging contribute to the nutrients the soil will retain and provide habitat for birds and other ecosystem participants.

The messes are not uniformly celebrated, however, demonstrating the different ways that humans relate to the environmental assemblages they take part in. In MSTF one survey respondent made clear that they do not agree with the forest management decisions undertaken by the town. They wrote “I hate the way they cut so many trees and dug up the trails at Maple Shade. It’s not management, it’s horrible. I haven’t been back there since. And I won’t go until the forest has time to heal. I want to walk in the woods, not a commercial logging area.” This person expressed frustration with the idea that this process is considered sustainable management. They say the trails are being ruined by the forest’s “‘destruction which some call ‘management,’” and that their “needs and opinions and love are equally valid to those who want to destroy and ‘develop.’” This person reacted negatively to this process of forestry and not for anti-environmental reasons, far from it, they are clearly passionate about environmental conservation but differ from the approach taken. Similarly, in CCF, tensions flared up surrounding the process of forestry, this time where business interests conflicted with ecological interests. In the summer of 2023, the COFC closed large sections of trail because of forest management. Like in MSTF, the goal was to open up canopy gaps in an area lacking in biodiversity, including cutting and selling as timber many large white pines. As Jacob Arthur,

who is involved in the COFC management, told me, he was worried the management was “going to really change how these trails in here in particular would feel. Because they had a certain feel to them, you really felt like you were in a forest, and, you know, these big white pines were really definitive of that whole area.” He also said that this section, near the “Cliffs of Insanity” trail, was one of the most popular in the forest. He said, “we had people who didn’t re-up their membership because of [its closure].” Since most of COFC’s revenue comes from the seasonal membership fees it charges for bike and ski access, complaints from the customer base hold a lot of weight in decision-making. Beyond the structural changes to the forest, there are now marking flags and wire cages around some saplings as part of a UVM-funded study, which, to Arthur, can be unseemly and ruin the untouched forest feel COFC tries to effect for its visitors. The business apparatus built into the natural community leads to additional conflicts about management practices and effects on the forest.

### *B. Historic Preservation*

Each of the town forests contains relics of the landscape history of Vermont. From the stone walls that crisscross the property, to the specific makeup of different stands of trees, to the barbed wire and wolf trees that speak to a pastoral landscape. These are important to the feel of a place and, as discussed in the section on the poetic effects of these relics, impact how people view and interpret their forests. CCF, located near the nexus of Vermont commercial development in Williston, elicited fewer responses or engagement with these themes in the interviews than MSTF, but nonetheless had similar responses in the survey.

The historical legacy of previous land use at CCF extends from the iconic Giles Chittenden house throughout the forests and fields, which “are still defined by old stone walls, mature plantings, and historic trails and roads.”<sup>71</sup> The historic land management is not lost on the users of the trails, both survey respondents and interviewees mentioned the legacy of past landowners as important aspects of their time in these woods. 26 of 79 respondents in CCF (~33%) mentioned that historic value is one of their priorities for a town forest.<sup>72</sup> One person wrote about why they voted for the acquisition of the property for a town forest “Appreciation for the past history and all that it brought my family.”<sup>73</sup> In her interview, Mary Claire said that the land “provides such a direct link back to a former time in Vermont, and, you know, an era of family farms and generations of families growing up and making a living. Not to romanticize it but I think there is an important insight that we can get from coming to Catamount, to the remains of those past land management decisions.” She values the “Sense of connection across centuries, really. Especially when Williston has had so much recent new development, especially over in Taft Corners, it’s nice to have a place that is still very much what Vermont used to be, at least for a period of time, help remind people of past lifestyles and past struggles too.” To Claire, the simple act of remembering helps to ground her in this place and feel connected to the land.

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<sup>71</sup> National Register of Historic Places, “Giles Chittenden House,” sec. 7 pg. 11.

<sup>72</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>73</sup> This respondent hints at the shift of historic legacy to include more recent developments and the community COFC has built. This dynamic will be addressed explicitly in the next section.

In MSTF, a similar dynamic unfolds. The landscape history of the property is visible through a few markers. Within the woods you can still find remnants of barbed wire inside sugarbushes, indicating a mixed use, with the space between trees used as pasture for cows.<sup>74</sup> The most obvious remnant, though, and arguably the defining human-made characteristic of this forest, is the stone wall that accompanies visitors from the parking lot to the trailhead. The wall is nearly a mile long, one section in a region-wide network of walls and a clear indicator of an agricultural past. Multiple interviewees at MSTF reported a story that the wall was built by Hessian mercenaries taken prisoner during the American Revolution. While hard to verify, this folk story contributes to the meaning-making of residents and their town. In an interview, Ron Harrity expressed his amazement at the construction process itself: “it's pretty crazy when you think about when this was done, when this was all oxen and carts. They didn't have hydraulic diesel excavators to do this. So to keep this standing takes maintenance.” Robert “Bob” Jackson was the last owner of the property before its sale to the town. “He was very proud of this wall,” said Peter Holden, who knew Jackson before his death, “I think a lot of the reason why we were able to get so much support for the town forest and preserving this farm to always be a farm was because of this wall and the historic nature of the wall and what everyone sees every day going to and from the school.” The remnant of a past landscape, according to Holden, is almost definitional of the forest. Every one of the MSTF interviewees mentioned the stone wall without prompting. Since the first ¼ mile of the trail is following the wall, it is almost impossible to ignore. Greg Copeland said that the town needed to preserve “the best stone wall in the town of Westford.” Jane Archer identified the property as an example of an ideal Vermont aesthetic, “I think the classic Vermont landscape is exactly what we're seeing here. Like rolling farmland surrounded by forests...Before settlers came, it was all just forested, like people were working hard with bare hands to make this open land, so it really is sort of a classic way we think about it.” This historic land use, inextricably linked to the ecology and natural communities of Vermont, leads to an idea about what Vermont *should* look and feel like.

### C. *Preservation From Development*

Westford and Williston are both relatively small towns, and their attitudes toward community and development reflect that. The interviewees and survey respondents, alike, identified development and subdivision of properties as something to be avoided.

While Williston has a relatively high population, Westford has a much lower one. Westford residents indicated wanting to protect more than a general Vermont identity, but also the small-town community feel that would be directly under threat in new development plans. Jane Archer said about Westford Elementary, “I always quote my younger daughter saying that going to that school is like having 20 cousins. She's like, I don't remember my life when these people weren't part of it. We don't always get along, but we sort of have to learn in the long run.” She also says that “it's an easy place to kind of slot into for young families...[there's] a lot of friendship and collaboration.” While Westford can feel like a very tight-knit community to those who call it home, some have mentioned that it can be slightly more difficult to join the

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<sup>74</sup> “WTL-Long-Term-Management-Plan-2019.Pdf,” 7.

community from somewhere else. Ron Harrity, who moved to the area from out of state years ago said that his children had some difficulty being the “new kid” in class, “when in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade everybody in the class had gone to school with each other since kindergarten.” In his own relationships, Harrity noted that he had some difficulty making friends at first because people tended to be harder to get to know. But he also pointed out that he has “deeper personal relationships with people now, than after 20 years in Colorado.” This tight-knit feature of the town is reflected in its outlook on and relationship with MSTF.

Combining the small-town feel presented by Westford with the idyllic image of Vermont contained in the Historic and Ecological Preservation sections helps us understand why there is such an aversion to development. The specter of subdivision is not a new phenomenon in Vermont. Many argue that the only way Vermont can fix what they identify as a demographic crisis is to build more housing and attract more people, something that will boost the economy. The Vermont Futures Project is emblematic of this movement. It argues for an increase in economic growth, while managing social justice and environmental concerns.<sup>75</sup> Much of this initiative centers around housing expansion and new developments, upsetting not just people citing environmental concerns, but also those who value their close-knit communities. Taft Corners, home to dozens of outlet stores and shopping centers, was cited by two different interviewees at CCF as something they do not want to see spread. Preserving CCF as a space that is not going to be developed was a key factor in their appreciation for the forest.

“Development” was treated almost as a dirty word, especially in the MSTF interviews. When discussing projects designed to increase accessibility to town forests, Greg Copeland said, “all of a sudden, town forests seem to be receiving attention from the towns and getting, oh, I hate to call it development but getting some attention that makes them accessible.” Copeland indicated his support for increased accessibility in town lands while simultaneously making clear that he did not support “development.” The property that is now MSTF, when it was transitioning from the Jackson farm, was intended to be subdivided and developed before being purchased by the town. On that initiative, Ron Harrity said, “it keeps it from being developed, which would have been the other alternative. We'd be walking through subdivision homes right now otherwise.” Keeping the land public and accessible was an oft-cited reason for opposing development and instead bringing the land into town ownership. On the meaning of simply having a town forest, Peter Holden said, “Oh, it means of a future. Of having a large town forest as opposed to either private, inaccessible and or even fully developed land.” Protecting this land from what could be large-scale residential or commercial development takes on a specific characteristic in CCF. The proximity to Taft corners and higher density areas like Burlington gives CCF a unique role as an oasis within existing an already densely populated area, instead of MSTF interviewees’ hopes that large-scale development will not ever get that far. Two factors informing this preservation are the ownership undertaken by CCF and MSTF’s communities and the ability to pass something down to future generations.

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<sup>75</sup> “Vermont Futures Project,” accessed March 23, 2025, <https://vtfuturesproject.org/>.

### C. Community Ownership

CCF and MSTF are each important spaces in their communities, but the communities in question differ slightly. MSTF's community is undeniably the town of Westford. Most of the collective activity that flows through that network is organized by people who have worked on the select board or conservation commission, and community organizations like the library or elementary school. The town's small population and geographic footprint makes the forest more easily impacted by individuals and groups. CCF's community, however, is the Catamount Outdoor Family Center more than Williston itself. Most of the activity that flows through that forest is organized and impacted by COFC. For example, when a visitor wants to mountain bike, they pay COFC, when there is a fungus walk, it is led by one of the board members, if someone just wants to walk through the forest, they do so on trails managed and planned by COFC. This means that as the system acts and is acted upon, it is within the framework of COFC.

Lots of community-organized activities have sprung up around the forests. In CCF, a lot of these revolve around recreation as the forest itself does. Mary Claire says, "the recreational side is super important. There's a sort of sense of community ownership that I think is really important. People feel more invested in it, maybe financially, but also emotionally." Catherine Stemler said: "I'm part of Mansfield Nordic Club, which is a local Nordic ski club, and I'm part of their master's group and all summer we have a masters running group that usually meets like Thursday nights or something. And we'll do trail running, it's totally like show and go. Kind of social runs, but. There's a good group of us that do that." For Stemler the forest serves as a place to build and maintain community ties to other humans, not just the natural world. As a physical space, too, CCF is accessible, especially thanks to its active management and well-worn infrastructure. Lauren Anthony, who has struggled with mobility in many natural spaces, praised the forest's accessibility, down to a rogue fallen branch on a trail, saying "[i]t's like I know they'll take care of it. I just take a picture and send it off." This quick-acting, and attentive responsiveness to visitors' concerns makes her feel safe and heard not just among the community but by the people who manage the forest. An essential aspect of community at CCF (which will also be analyzed in the next section) is COFC's camp system. With dozens of programs running over the course of the summer, "camps are a huge part of our foundational funding here," said Jacob Arthur. These camps lead to deep interpersonal connections between staff and community members, campers and the COFC, and people and environment.

Many of the people who spend time in MSTF reflect on a sort of collective ownership reflected through personal involvement with care of the woods. In part as a result of the small size of Westford's population, much of the regular trail maintenance is done on volunteer days, or by one of the conservation commission's five members. This type of involvement grants people an active role in their town lands, further cementing the notion of pride and town identity. In describing the town's culture broadly, Jane Archer said, "Broadly speaking, we are a community of people that likes to roll up our sleeves and volunteer and get things done. I don't know, to me that feels sort of like a throwback at this point when you look at how the world is

today.” Collective action and stewardship of the town forests gives people a more personal perspective. Karen Thompson said:

Well for me, it gives me a sense of pride and ownership of this place because I care deeply about it, and I want other people to care deeply about it too. You know, we strive to maintain these trails as best we can so that it’s easy for people to come and they have an enjoyable experience. So it feels really special that I get to manage a place for people that feel the same way about this place that I do. So it’s like we’re doing this for everybody and everybody loves it.

That kind of community centered attitude is reflected in people’s perception of the work they do to keep the forest healthy and accessible. Ron Harrity said, “I’ve come out a couple volunteer days where just small groups of us walk through and just pick up sticks and cut back branches and stuff.” Greg Copeland shared his satisfaction in participating in whatever way he can, “I’m not going to go to committee meetings, I’ve done enough of that in my life, and I don’t want to be in charge of anything. But I will happily come carry that bucket or whatever...It doesn’t even have to be something that’s trail related. Someone has to empty the dog poop canisters down by the parking lot trail head.” Taking care of a place in this way gives the people who spend time in the forest a sense of connection and integration.

Beyond ecological stewardship, other organizations help facilitate access and community connectivity. Peter Holden said, “there are plenty of cross-country ski teams, and cross-country running teams that take advantage of Misty Meadows.” Kristy Barrett, whose daughter attended Westford Elementary, said “we used to have a haunted forest. Every year, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade would put one on as a fundraiser.” Karen Thompson shared her experience as someone involved with the Conservation Commission, “we’ve hosted story walks and a poetry walk, which is a collaboration with the [Westford] Public Library.” She said also:

We did a moonlight snowshoe. We took people out here in February during a full moon, and it was actually snowing like crazy. So we were all getting these crazy notifications on our phone the whole time, and we were getting squalled all over the place. That was a very magical time because it was an interaction between the weather and community members and being in this place. It was very cool.

This type of experience helps bond people to one another and to their space. Community organizations like this and others at MSTF and CCF help cultivate a sense of belonging and home in the woods, which are then passed down through the years.

#### **D. Future Generations**

Each CCF and MSTF are seen as a resource to be passed down to future generations within their respective communities. These themes are echoed in the prior discussions of ecological conservation and protection of a small-town identity. Ecological conservation is

aimed at preserving a piece of land's biodiversity and resilience, something to share with the community's children and their children in the face of the climate crisis. Protection of the small-town identity is aimed at holding onto the history of the place and not letting it be paved over in the name of development. Many of the interviewees and survey respondents identified the ability to pass these spaces down to their children and future generations as a primary motivation for the forests' creation and their continued participation in them.

Human interactions with natural systems are inherently future-focused, since the lifespan of trees and ecosystems is dramatically longer than our own. Ron Harrity spoke to this feeling regarding trees he and his family planted on their own property. "I plant trees in my property and my kids will always say, 'You know you're not going to live enough to see this oak, right?' Well that's OK." Being a part of a future process can be enough motivation to work within these natural assemblages. To start with MSTF, many people overtly identified the role that the forest would play for years to come. Peter Holden noted that, "I get to enjoy it today, but generations to come, the value here is for generations to come to enjoy the land and enjoy the natural experience." Kristy Barrett who was involved with the forest and Westford Elementary said, "We can make sure that we keep it for the long term. So it was really important to kind of just leave it untouched and for everyone to be able to go in and enjoy."

The town lands are a space for the children who attend Westford Elementary to recreate, explore and learn, as many people told me. Ron Harrity, whose children attended the school, spoke to the value that Misty Meadows town forest, right behind the school, gives the students. "That was one of the really nice things about having a school where there was enough land right behind the school that kids could be back there, and the school had [cross-country] skis that they could use." Beyond recreation, he also made clear the importance of the educational opportunities afforded by the forest:

There was this classroom they set up right on the edge of the woods by the parking lot where they could take the younger kids and just have a nice learning environment outside. That helped make that connection and being outside and different activities in different situations. Yeah you can go out there and play and ski and run around; but to go out there and sit on a wood stump and, you know, learn something is kind of different.

Access to an outdoor space for environmental education is a key part of Westford's relationship to the forest. Karen Thompson, who was involved with the town's conservation commission, spoke to this when describing the sort of programming she and her partner have led for the school. She said that she loves leading these types of programs because "[i]t's like a perfect example of what landscape ecology is, you know? We can see everything from our vantage point and that is the landscape. 'So now let's talk about the things that we see here in this landscape and what are the important features for humans and for animals and plants, insects, blah blah blah, all the living things, including humans.'" Thompson's perspective and education situates the children in the human-environmental dynamics of which a town forest is emblematic. Even some who do

not have children see the value in this type of early connection. Greg Copeland told me about the first town-led tour of the forest after the purchase of the land with many families, including children. He said, “here’s the Beaver Pond, the sun’s out. We’ve just introduced a dozen little kids to the places they can play in the woods, in their own neighborhood. I considered the whole project a great success at that point.” The introduction and integration of young people with the forest is a sign of a relationship and care for the woods that will continue for years to come.

The COFC also shows its forward-thinking preservation of the woods for future generations, mostly through its camp system. The forest as a multi-generational space, unlike MSTF, has been operational since 1978, and so has seen people grow up with the woods and form a close connection to them. In reference to this specific dynamic, Jacob Arthur said:

We have board members that worked here as kids or grew up here. And that’s something we have really tried to do; keep that pipeline flowing and strong. The kids that come to camp we now identify directly as they get older and start to age out, like ‘Hey next year we’d love to see you come out and apply for a job.’ And so there’s this constant feed of new kids that are growing up into adults and getting that chance to work here and share what they love about the place.

This contributes to a feeling in the forest and organization of connection and deep history. Plenty of the people I have met are children of board members, or friends of board members, or friends of staff members. Two of the people I interviewed were introduced to the forest and COFC through their children. It is hard to overstate the impact that this early introduction through young people can have on people’s connection to the forest. Catherine Stemler identified Little Bellas, an introduction to mountain biking program for young girls, as an important early introduction to the space, “My daughter did the Little Bellas mountain bike camps here. My daughter’s in college now and doesn’t ride as much, but me and my husband bike a lot.” Mary Claire said, “Little Bellas is a huge part of our Catamount relationship because that’s where our girls learned to mountain bike. They built a lot of great relationships and a lot of good mountain biking skills, and they had time in the forest. We were able to experience Catamount as like a multi-generational space.” Even once her children grew up, CCF is still an important place to her, “I mean my ‘kids’ are 21 and 23 now, but even at like Christmas break or something, we’ll all come and ski together here and it’s even more precious to me. They both went to UVM, but at some point they’re going to probably move away, so I really treasure those family times.” This multi-generational connection is a key part of the forest-community interactions. Taken alongside the desire for ecological protection and preservation of a Vermont identity, these factors can help us understand the deep connections between these communities and their forests, and what they specifically value within them.

### **Discussion**

These findings indicate that a multitude of factors attract and benefit the town forests’ communities. Access to recreation and natural beauty leads to a love of the forest itself and what

it can provide its users. The forests also act as microcosms of a broader New England landscape that is distilled into a Vermont identity. The personal and intergenerational connection the communities build with the land, even before they were town forests, is passed down to future generations of forest users. These findings provide an understanding of what these town forests mean to their communities. My second research question is: “Is assemblage theory useful in understanding the relationship between these forests and their communities?”

First, we will see how assemblage theory, as outlined in the Literature Review, can be applied to help understand the interplay between human and non-human factors. Second, we will examine what the factors that make up the assemblage are, and how they end up defining the character of the assemblage. Third, we will examine to what extent assemblage theory can be directly applied within the forests’ management and what, if any, changes need to be made to make this application practical.

#### A. *Assemblage*:

We can apply our background on assemblage and distributive agency to these case studies. We can view each “individual”, e.g. a cross-country skier, a maple tree, or a stone wall, as inextricably linked to one another. The cross-country skier would not have the same experience in the woods, if they did not ski under a certain maple, or past a certain stone wall. Nor would that maple tree or stone wall be there if the humans that managed the land had not chosen to start a sugarbush or build a wall of the stones the frost heave pushed out each year. These individuals are examples of Spinoza’s bodies, and Bennett’s analysis places them in relationship one another, each one is “continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies.”<sup>76</sup> Bennett argued that these bodies form alliances and build themselves up into larger networks of bodies, or assemblages.

Deleuze and Guattari’s term “assemblage” can be used to describe these two town forests. The bodies contained within the assemblage are so interconnected that it is impossible to separate them from each other. The defining characteristic of these assemblages is their changeability, called by Deleuze and Guattari, multiplicity. In the case of our town forests, the decision to start the Catamount Outdoor Family Center in 1978 fundamentally changed the character of the forest. The decision to turn Maple Shade into a town forest instead of residential subdivisions, too, is an example of the relationships between bodies defining the assemblage, rather than the individual actors. Bennett’s understanding of distributive agency is especially important here, because, while the two examples I just listed are ostensibly human-driven choices, they include the forest and other “natural” features’ agency. The choice to start COFC was driven by economic and financial motivations, the natural factors of snowfall and elevation, and a love for these sports passed down through generations. Maple Shade’s conversion to a town forest instead of a subdivision was thanks to community initiatives to preserve its ecology and social/historical legacy. So, although it was humans who contributed to the forest’s new status and character, they were, as Latour wrote, “the moving target of a vast array of entities

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<sup>76</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 21.

swarming through [them],” the agricultural legacy of the land and New England’s propensity to value and protect it among them.<sup>77</sup>

One of these entities is climate change and it casts its shadow into the creation of these forests. William Connolly and Anna Tsing each have terms that can help describe this difficulty. Connolly uses “fragility” and Tsing uses “precarity.” There are massive ecological and social ramifications to this self-destructive process, and our existing assemblages are at once fragile and precarious. Tsing wrote about third nature, and how, to create a livable world, “we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages. Assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve: this *is* the story.”<sup>78</sup> We see proactive action reflected in the very creation of the town forests, and the rationale provided by survey respondents and interviewees. The town chose to assert their agency as an assemblage themselves and shift the character of the human-environmental assemblage to one that emphasizes ecological preservation in addition to recreation and aesthetic value.

While human activity in forests is often seen in a negative light thanks to a past and present of deforestation and irresponsible stewardship, human intervention is not always bad and can even benefit the natural areas subject to it. These town forests each have undergone disruptive forest management that changed the way they look and will operate in the future. This is an example of humans exhibiting their agency within the woods and is broadly in line with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) which emphasizes the importance of human *action* within ecosystems for the health and benefit of both human and non-human actors. Kimmerer’s “Honorable Harvest” is an obvious example of human intervention benefitting the non-human world, in turn benefiting humans again. This direct action is an example of assemblages, humans are and have always been inextricably linked, making clear the importance of the legacy created by past human actions and how they affect the present makeup of the forest.

If we view the process of the creation of, and engagement in the forests through an assemblage lens we can now better understand and contextualize all the elements that speak through the woods.

#### *B. What Characterizes the Assemblage?*

Now that we have established that the forests act as assemblages, we must look at the bodies that constitute them. Many of the interviewees indicated their desire to protect the land on which the town forests sit, both for environmental and social preservation. The traditional understanding of landscape history and ecology is present within the testimony shared by the interviewees. So many of the features of New England landscapes identified by historians like Mark Lapping and geographers like Joseph Conforti play a significant role in the place connections of town forest users. Several interviewees and survey respondents identified the historic Vermont landscape as an important part of what the town forests offer their communities. The idyllic, pastoral landscape, with its rolling hills, dark treelines, and miles of

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<sup>77</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 158.

zig-zagging stone fences create a specific identity and feel that many, like Jane Archer and Mary Claire, think is worth protecting.

This is often accomplished through the care and effort of landowners who may manage sugarbush or woodlots beyond their mere economic benefits. A perfect example of this, cited by Morse et al. in “Performing a New England Landscape,” is the iconic stone wall on what used to be the Jackson Farm, but is now Maple Shade Town Forest. This wall, having been meticulously maintained by the landowners serves no current purpose beyond its aesthetic and historic value. Now a defining characteristic of MSTF, it was mentioned by every interviewee there and is an embodiment of the New England landscape and how its imagery and iconography maintain its significance in community identity past its practical uses.

This New England aesthetic is important to many town forest users, as is the value of the environment they occupy. The way they relate to it is in line with the scholarship surrounding affective relationships with the forest. Many residents identify the aforementioned relics and artifacts of a pastoral past as important features of the forest. This falls in line with Kent Ryden’s emphasis on the depth that lies within New England’s woods. It is important to many of the interviewees to find space for themselves within the woods, often through solitary, peaceful walks, usually involving observation of flora and fauna, bird watching and listening to birdsongs was among the most common leisure activities reported by users. This, according to Terence Mosher, is a continuation of the early New England literary tradition of which Frost and Thoreau are emblematic. The music of the forests is an undeniably important part of a walk through CCF or MSTF, to which my own auto-ethnographic notes can attest, as well. This is Tsing’s polyphony made manifest. We hear the songs of past eras, of Frost, and of the land every time we listen to birdsongs.

The love of place and environment is replicated and passed down in each forest as well. The camps system set up by COFC, especially Little Bellas, which was cited multiple times, are designed to continue the existing human-land relations in CCF through future generations. MSTF’s proximity to Westford Elementary echoes the importance of this gift to future generations through environmental education, like the programs run by Kirsten Tyler or the access to recreation in the forest for the students cited by Ron Harrity. Scholar Kathleen Dana’s “treeline” education introduces the gray area from which humans can relate to the environment and recognize the importance their relationship with it, without fully diving into the assemblage theory.

All these factors, and loves of the forests are Latour’s “swarming entities,” they surge through individuals and communities when they maintain their stone walls, spend time in community, or go birdwatching. All these forest users are part of this assemblage and engage in its polyphony whether or not they are paying rapt attention.

These factors all characterize the forests and make them what they are. We can describe this culmination of feelings and elements that define the assemblage as intergenerational. When I walk through the woods, the years before combine with the present and future to create a multi-layered experience that all impact the feel of the forest. Geologic and ecological processes make

a backdrop, on which the centuries of human settlement and farming left stone walls, sugarbushes, and barbed wire. The forest management that explicitly caters to old-growth characteristics combines with the children that are constantly being introduced to the woods to create a sense of the future. The forest carries millennia of land history, centuries of settlement by humans, decades of recreation management, and an unknown number of future years baked into its forest management and children. In return it acts upon the human community, typically in beneficial ways, serving as an accessible community space and speaking to it through its echoing histories.

Walking through these woods is a special experience, one that includes the obvious natural beauty present in the trees, birds, and bugs that populate it. It also carries a distinctly melancholic tone. The rusty barbed wire that can still be found, the old, sometimes decrepit stone walls, and the wolf trees that spread their limbs within the canopy hint at a time gone by. The poetry of Frost perfectly captures the sad, abandoned beauty of these town forests. When I walked through I felt equal parts awe and peace within nature, and an eerie feeling I couldn't shake. Whether it is because I am prematurely nostalgic before my departure and graduation from UVM and the beauty of the Vermont countryside, or because there are centuries of human and non-human ghosts working their will on me, I don't know. But the feeling is unmistakable.

On a grander scale, the woods' repurposing as a matsutake-like, third nature space that benefits humans, provides community identity and connection, and preserves an ecologically threatened area is a well of hope. The climate disaster is existential and impossible for an individual to solve. These town forests are an autumn fungus in the face of a long winter. This kind of space is special and its human and non-human benefits necessitate its continual protection and use in this way. This special relationship has fostered a love of community and nature, something that I think is essential as we move forward into an uncertain and climate-anxious future. These forests can serve as inspiration or blueprints for how important natural spaces are for both personal and community reasons, but also for global and existential reasons.

### *C. Practical Applications of Assemblage Theory Within the Assemblage*

The connections built between the towns and their forests have yielded benefits from social and ecological preservation to natural beauty and solitude. Because of this, the users are predisposed to believe in the importance of a strong relationship between the town and its forest. This is not quite at the depth of full assemblage theory, the ideas championed by Deleuze and Guattari and Tsing among others. Many of the responses indicated a strong connection to the idea of "wilderness" or leaving nature "untouched." While not agreeing that the story of human and environmental interaction is of mutual dependence and inseparability, the perspectives espoused by the participants in this study can be applied to a similar end.

Viewing these forests as assemblages increases our connection to them. Rather than seeing the woods as a separate entity to which we hold no responsibility beyond our own immediate benefits, we can see it as a part of our community. Seeing this sentiment reflected in the town residents' conversations gave me hope that an assemblage-adjacent approach could yield massive benefits in time and monetary investment for both humans and non-humans alike.

If the goal of applying assemblage theory to human and non-human interactions is to increase the care and protection of all life on the planet (and it should be), the town forest users are primed to apply a different, more digestible, version of it. This should be one that maintains the divisions between individuals and the environment, something that we are taught through Western historiography and environmental relations. But this version of the theory should emphasize the deep ties between the environment and its community, this type of understanding necessitates interdependence and responsibility.

We might call this: Practical Environmental Assemblage Theory (PEAT). A framework that emphasizes relationships and interconnectivity between the human and non-human bodies that make up the assemblage, this approach could yield benefits for land-use decisions. Take, for example, a community that is struggling to decide how to manage a tract of land. PEAT can help the community balance competing interests by giving voice to the non-human actors that are involved in the management. The forest, whether it will be managed for timber, recreation, biodiversity, or all of them (as many forests are), has a stake in what happens, and by considering the non-human world we can decide on how to manage it for the mutual benefit of humans and non-humans. What is good for the forest will often intersect with human interests, like in the case of ecological conservation, the forest will remain healthy, and the humans will benefit from a richer, livelier forest. This framework would also forward elements like historic relics or community organizations in forests, that, taken together, speak to the interwoven world between human and non-human that the natural area and human community have shared for centuries. PEAT offers a framework that understands natural interests as tied to and often aligned with human interests. This perspective can lead to reliably pro-environmental decision-making that will lead to the creation of more public natural spaces, yielding social and material benefits for humans and safety for natural areas in and around human communities.

### Conclusion

This project sought to answer the following questions: 1) “What meaning do town forests hold for their communities?” 2) “How can assemblage theory help us understand the relationships between the forest and its community?” The mobile methods employed in this project, interviews and auto-ethnographic field notes, allows for an on-the-ground understanding of what it is like to be a town forest user in Vermont.

I framed this project through the lens of assemblage theory and to applied the ideas of multiplicity to the interconnected relationships between the town forests and their respective communities. While forest users do not directly engage with assemblage or polyphonic theory, their ideas about what the town forest is and *should* be indicate a strong connection between themselves and their forest, without engaging with full polyphony. This is not in line with the existing scholarship on assemblages, however it can serve as an early example of how assemblage theory can be distilled and molded to fit different contexts.

Future study is required to get a full understanding of Vermonters’ connections to natural spaces. A study that includes varying socioeconomic demographics and geographic focuses (e.g. Burlington’s younger, urban population, or more rural areas across Vermont than Westford)

would contribute to a more complete picture of how Vermonters relate to public natural areas nearby their communities.

The project of practical assemblage theory applications can and should be continued. The benefits that an understanding of human-environmental interactions as reciprocal and interdependent will lead to better outcomes for human understanding of nature and its practical benefits, while also helping to build a world prepared to meet the climate crisis.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A* *Interview Script*

#### **Introduction**

1. Introduce myself and explain the purpose of the interview, thank them for offering their time.
2. Go over types of questions and extend right to refuse any questions or stop the interview at any time.
3. Obtain permission to record and proceed with the interview.

#### **Questions (Non-rigid, improvise as feels necessary. Keep it conversational and informal.)**

1. How long have you lived in the area and been coming to this forest?
  - a. If from Vermont: ask about family roots and connections.
  - b. If not from Vermont: ask why they chose to move here.
2. What do you enjoy about this forest?
  - a. Why do you choose this forest instead of any other natural space?
3. What do you think town forests give communities that they might not get without them?
4. Do you often see other people here?
  - a. What do you notice about how other people use the forest?
5. Do you have any anecdotes or stories about time in this forest that you valued?
6. I am looking to interview more people; do you know anybody who might be interested in participating in an interview?

**Closing:** Thank you for your time and participation in this interview!

*Appendix B*  
*Interview Recruitment Materials*

**Sample e-mail if recommended by another interviewee:**

Dear [Recipient's Name],

My name is Lucas Roemer. I am a senior at UVM, and I am conducting research on town forests in Vermont in the Environmental Studies program. One of those forests is [Forest Name]. I received this email address from [Interviewee's Name].

The study aims to understand the relationships between town forests and their communities. Any insight or perspective you might be able to provide would be most welcome and helpful in my project! I am wondering if you have any interest in participating in a short (30-60 minute) in-person walking interview at the town forest with me.

Please reach out to me at [lroemer@uvm.edu](mailto:lroemer@uvm.edu), if you have any questions at all!

Sincerely,  
Lucas

**Sample e-mail if opted into interview on the survey:**

Dear [Recipient's Name],

Thank you so much for indicating your interest in an interview via the survey! My name is Lucas Roemer, and I am leading the town forest study with UVM.

The study aims to understand the relationships between town forests and their communities. Any insight or perspective you might be able to provide would be most welcome and helpful in my project! I am wondering if you have any interest in participating in a short (30-60 minute) in-person walking interview at the town forest with me.

Please reach out to me at [lroemer@uvm.edu](mailto:lroemer@uvm.edu), if you have any questions at all!

Sincerely,  
Lucas

*Appendix C*  
*Survey Materials*

**Front Porch Forum Advertisement:**

UVM Town Forest Research Study:

A UVM-funded research study on the relationships between town forests and their communities is seeking responses from community members familiar with the town forest.

There is an informational sheet about the survey at this link: [IRB Survey Info Sheet Dec 2 2024.docx](#)

To participate in the survey and share your thoughts, please follow this link:

[https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=WHcXHGtN3EOq6zucQlYpZ48TdxKi vJGk\\_rRnaftyQNUOEtISEFJTzBEUVZOUdDXSfc4RTZKWIFOSS4u](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=WHcXHGtN3EOq6zucQlYpZ48TdxKi vJGk_rRnaftyQNUOEtISEFJTzBEUVZOUdDXSfc4RTZKWIFOSS4u)

Thank you!

**Linked Information Sheet:**

**Research Information Sheet**

**Title of Research Project:** Investigating the Role Vermont Town Forests Play in their Communities

**Lead Investigator:** Lucas Roemer

**Sites Where Research is Being Conducted:** University of Vermont

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Cheryl Morse

**Sponsor:** Patrick Leahy Honors College, University of Vermont (UVM)

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are familiar with the town forest and have a relationship with it that might provide insight into the larger study of town forests. This study is being conducted by the University of Vermont.

Your participation in this research study is optional. We encourage you to ask questions and take the opportunity to discuss the study with anybody you think can help you make this decision.

### **Why is This Research Study Being Conducted?**

The goal of the study is to understand the historical and present operation of town forests. Specifically, the ways town forests *act* in their communities, e.g. natural resources, recreation, or community events.

### **What Is Involved In The Study?**

You are invited to take part in a five-minute survey. It will contain questions related to your usage and experience in the town forests. There will be a question at the end that will ask any participants who are interested in also participating in an interview to provide their name and contact information. This can be a phone number, e-mail address, or any other preferred method of contact. The responses will go directly to the researcher and will be stored in a secure folder and destroyed at the end of the study.

### **What Are the Risks and Discomforts Of The Study?**

We will do our best to protect the information we collect from you and avoid any potential risk for an accidental breach of confidentiality.

### **What Are the Benefits of Participating In The Study?**

There is no direct benefit to you anticipated from participating in this study. However, it is hoped that the information gained from the study will help the town itself, other Vermont governments, and Vermonters better understand their forests and what is appealing to residents about them.

### **Are There Any Costs?**

There are no costs associated with taking the survey.

### **Can You Withdraw or Be Withdrawn from This Study?**

You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time.

### **What About Confidentiality?**

To protect your confidentiality, we will not store any identifying information with the survey results. The results of this study may be published or presented.

### **Contact Information**

You may contact Lucas Roemer, the researcher in charge of this study, at (202) 316-8468, for more information about this study. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a

participant in a research project you may contact the Director of the Research Protections Office at the University of Vermont at 802-656-5040.

### Interview Questions

1. Do you spend time and/or recreate in [Town Forest Name]?
  - a. Yes
    - i. What sort of things do you do in this place? (Open Response)
    - ii. Why do you choose to spend time in these places? (Open Response)
    - iii. Please share a story/experience from this place (this can be a story about what you typically do in this place, or something memorable that happened there): (Open Response)
  - b. No
2. Do you spend time in other outdoor spaces in Vermont? If so, please list them: (Open Response)
3. Did you vote in favor of the creation of this forest?
  - a. Yes
    - i. If yes: Why? (Open Response)
  - b. No
    - i. If no: Why not? (Open Response)
4. To you, what is/are the most important function(s) of a town forest? (Select all that apply)
  - a. Recreation
  - b. Ecological Conservation
  - c. Natural Resources (e.g. logging)
  - d. Historical Value
  - e. Spiritual Value
  - f. Something else (please explain)
5. Where do you live? (Open Response)
6. What is your gender?
  - a. Man
  - b. Woman
  - c. Other
7. What race/ethnicity best describes you? (Select all that apply)
  - a. White/Caucasian
  - b. Black/African American
  - c. Hispanic
  - d. Asian or Pacific Islander
  - e. Indigenous or Native American
  - f. Multiracial or Biracial
  - g. Other
8. What is your age group?

- a. 18-24
  - b. 25-34
  - c. 35-44
  - d. 45-54
  - e. 55-64
  - f. 65+
9. If you are interested in participating in a short (30-60 minute) in-person walking interview about your relationship with the town forest, please submit your name and whatever method of contact works best for you here: (Open Response)