

# Disappearing Vermont?

A report of fifty indicators that show what is happening to Vermont's environment and way of life.



Pasture adjacent to Susie Wilson Road, Essex Town — 1968



Same area in Essex Town today — March 2008

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# Disappearing Vermont

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## **Vermont: Endangered and Unsustainable?**

In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared that Vermont was an “endangered place.” Certainly Vermont as we have known it is disappearing at a steady and perhaps accelerating rate. Vermont is quite a different state than it was in 1970, the year of the first Earth Day.

It is hard to believe today that only thirty-eight years ago there was so little traffic on Vermont’s interstate highways that often while driving one would see no other cars for some distance. The land around the interchanges was largely undeveloped. You could seldom drive on any back road and even some main roads in the early morning or late afternoon without having to stop and wait while a farmer led his cows to or from a pasture across the road. Development ended at city and village limits, and sprawl and suburbanization were not part of our common vocabulary. There were no malls, no big box stores, no self-storage unit complexes, very few national chain hotels and motels, and almost no shopping centers outside of main business districts.

Some changes have improved our quality of life over that time: arts and crafts have flourished, quality restaurants abound, and outdoor recreation opportunities have expanded. It is troubling, however, that we see these and other changes occurring at the expense of the environment, our culture, and many aspects of our quality of life.

As we ponder these changes to Vermont, we must ask not only whether Vermont is an “endangered” or “disappearing” place,” but also whether, given global warming and the fact that the world is beginning to run out of cheap fossil fuels, Vermont is headed in an unsustainable direction. These questions are closely interwoven with the impacts of a growing population. In 1970, the population of Vermont was estimated at 444,330; in 2007, it was approximately 621,254. That is a 40% increase, or the equivalent of adding a city the size of Burlington every 8.2 years.

## **The Indicators**

To understand the impact population growth has had on Vermont, it is necessary to know the facts about Vermont’s past, its present and its future direction. Data collected from many sources, such as the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, provide the facts that we need to understand what is happening. In the table below, the baseline of 1970 is used because this is approximately when Vermont’s Interstate Highway system was completed. In part as a result of the interstates, Vermont’s population began to dramatically increase after several decades of remaining relatively stable. The intermediate year of 1982 is used because this is when good data on land use first became available, thanks to the Natural Resource Inventory conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While there may be no correlation between population growth and some of these indicators, there is certainly a very strong correlation with most of them.

The selected indicators are by no means all-inclusive, but they are intended to give a general indication of the overall status of that particular category, whether it is land use, agriculture, water and air quality, and forests. In some cases, the trends may not be clear because the report was limited to four specific years,

and in any given year there may be abnormalities. Where specific data was not available, knowledgeable Vermonters were asked to give their input and opinion about what is happening.

Of the fifty indicators we have collected for Vermont, about 68% (35) show a disturbing trend, and only about 20% (11) show a positive trend. Five show no clear trend.

### **The Major Changes**

The most significant impact of population growth is the amount of land that has been developed. The number of acres of developed land has jumped from an estimated 242,700 acres in 1982 to approximately 345,200 acres in 2003, or a 42% increase in 21 years. The increase in developed land affects many of the other changes, like global warming, because of increased carbon emissions due to more homes and businesses being heated and the ever-increasing number of vehicle miles being driven. As we know with global warming, what affects the planet affects Vermont, and what we do in Vermont affects the planet.

Land development also affects a whole range of other environmental concerns including land fragmentation, storm water runoff, lower water quality, and loss of wildlife habitat. Vermont is losing about 4,881 acres of land to development each year. If that trend continues we will lose another 125,000 acres by the year 2030. That is a 36% increase from the 2003 estimates. With about 23,000 acres in the average Vermont town, that is the equivalent of totally developing all of the acreage in between five and six of our towns by 2030.

A few of the other major changes over the past 37 years shown in the table include:

- the number of vehicle miles traveled increased from 2.9 billion to 7.7 billion, an increase of 250%
- the average annual combined temperature for three weather stations of the state rose from 42.9 degrees F to 47.4 degrees F
- the number of endangered species grew from 143 to 195.

One other great change is our loss of scenic views. Agricultural land has been declining as developed land has increased. While there is no direct relationship between declining agricultural land and increasing developed land, upwards of 40 percent of new built-up land is coming from existing or former cropland and pasture. This kind of land change alters the very characteristic of what our landscape looks like.

For example, there were about 4.5 acres of cropland and pasture for every acre of developed land in 1982. By 2003, this ratio was 2.5 to 1. If current trends continue, it will be just 40 years when the amount of developed land will begin to exceed the amount of farm or open land in Vermont.

According to David Raphael, Landscape Architect and lecturer at the University of Vermont, "Our state has transitioned from a rural agricultural pattern to one that is rural residential. The sprawl of structures and associated development threatens to dilute, if not destroy, the integrity of our scenic landscapes."

Some of the other changes that have occurred here are not quantifiable but are still clearly evident, such as the increase in noise and light pollution and the crowdedness of our recreation areas.

### **It's More Than Indicators**

Looking at the indicators of how Vermont is disappearing one could easily say, "Well so what? Times change and Vermont needs to change also. We'll just have to adapt and live with those changes."

However, there is something more important than the numbers and quotes and what they mean for the environment.

Even with the changes that have occurred, Vermont is still a rural state with a relatively undeveloped landscape and a small population. As a result, we have a closeness to the land that people in most other states have long lost. This closeness has meant that we appreciate and are connected to the natural environment through our work, our recreation and our everyday living. Most Vermonters have a sense of where much of their food, building materials, and fuel come from due to their long history of self-sufficiency and connection to the farms and forests. The ability to see and experience the natural environment on a regular basis allows us to more fully appreciate the awe and wonder of the mystery of creation.

This adds a spiritual dimension to our life that affects not only our relationship to the natural world, but also our relationship to each other. Our small residential population helps us have a strong sense of community in Vermont, with our town meetings, and strong volunteer efforts on volunteer fire departments, planning commissions, and snowmobile clubs, and the like. This affects how we respond to each other, including how we treat our neighbors and respond to them in times of need. So it really does matter deeply whether or not we work to maintain that which is best in Vermont or whether we will just accept that we are going to become like most other states. Growth for growth's sake will mean that we will lose what is special about Vermont. It is not inevitable. Instead of growth in quantity we should begin to think about growth in quality, and that can only be done if we recognize the uniqueness of Vermont and what aspects are most important to preserve.

### **The Future**

Of course, Vermont is not the only state or area that is disappearing. Many other places have essentially already disappeared. Environmental writer James Conaway in his newly published book, *Vanishing America: In Pursuit of Our Elusive Landscapes*, states that, "Everywhere I travel in America, I encounter a deep sense of loss; Americans have come to believe that growth and entitlement matter more than health and happiness in a country that paradoxically diminishes in prospect and comity even as it grows richer. The gap between ideals and means gets larger while access to public institutions – and public land – essential to our identity becomes more difficult." Talk to almost anyone who has lived in rural Vermont for twenty years or more, and they too will express that deep sense of loss and sadness as they describe the road they live on that used to have just one or a few houses, and now has five to ten times that many.

Over-development is definitely occurring in the states south of us. It is predicted that Rhode Island could lead the nation in forest loss, followed by New Jersey, Massachusetts and Connecticut, say researchers David J. Nowak and Jeffrey T. Walton, who painted a bleak picture of the region in a *Journal of Forestry* article more than a year ago. By 2050, they report that Rhode Island could be 70 percent urban. And Connecticut and Massachusetts - where Thoreau built a cabin in the woods to live deeply - could be 61 percent urban. What happens to the states south of us is sure to come to Vermont also, as can be seen in southern New Hampshire, an area that is fast becoming an extension of Boston and its suburbs.

Vermont too is disappearing, largely because of population growth. However, Vermont women currently have an average of 1.6 children. With a birth rate of 2.1 considered the replacement rate this means that our population growth is not coming from people living in Vermont, but primarily from people moving here from other states. Why are people moving here from other states? Because those states are overcrowded and people want the better quality of life that Vermont still offers. It could well be that if the U.S. population keeps on growing at a rate of at least 3.3 million per year, and global warming brings drought and water shortages to other parts of the country, we may have an even larger number of people

wanting to move here, and Vermont's population could grow at a rate that is much faster than is now projected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

### **What Can We Do to Keep Vermont from Disappearing?**

The United States, already the third most populous nation on Earth, has seen its population increase 50% since 1967. The Census Bureau projects that our present U.S. population of around 300 million will double in size to over half a billion in this century, probably by 2050. About one-third of the annual U.S. population growth is due to births over deaths, one-third to legal immigration, and one-third to illegal immigration. If we want to protect Vermont and ensure its future sustainability, we must urge our federal government to adopt policies that help to stabilize the U.S. population, including support for family planning, so that every child is a wanted child, and limiting permanent immigration to the same level as permanent emigration, which is about 250,000 per year.

Global population is also surging, especially in developing countries. We must urge our national leaders to promote global population stabilization, starting by reversing the Bush administration's 2001 decision to cut family planning funds to the U.N.'s main population agency. In developing nations across the globe, the U.S. should be providing financial support for the education of women, for economic development and for increased availability of family planning, all of which have been shown to reduce the rate of population growth.

Here in Vermont, until we stabilize Vermont's population at a sustainable level, we can adopt policies to focus growth in our already built-up areas, and to protect our still-rural areas. As former governor Madeleine Kunin says, "...as much growth as possible should be channeled to already developed areas so that we can protect our valuable open spaces." We also need to do all that we can to support the "Going Green" efforts to reduce our energy dependence on fossil fuels, develop alternative energy sources, and support local agriculture. Most importantly, it is time to draw a connection between the changes we have seen and population growth, and to begin a debate about what level of population in Vermont would be sustainable and appropriate, and how we can seek to achieve that level.

### **The Choice is Ours**

Is Vermont an endangered place? Is Vermont going to be a place to live sustainably, once we no longer have cheap fossil fuels to power our economy and meet our needs for energy? Facing the facts about the directions we are headed and having an open discussion about these facts is essential to answering these questions. As individuals, as communities, and as a state we have choices to make about what kind of future we want to leave the following generations. Past choices have gotten us where we are today. We have the freedom and responsibility to make choices today that will ensure a good life for those who follow us. It is time to stop ignoring the issue of population growth.

## CHANGES IN VERMONT FROM 1970 TO 2007

<b>*Criteria</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1982</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>Population Size</b>				
<sup>1</sup> Total Vermont Population	444,330	511,456	608,827	621,254
<sup>1</sup> Total U.S. Population	205,052,000	227,225,000	281,421,906	301,139,947 (July est.)
<sup>1</sup> Total World Population	3,706,618,163	4,453,831,714 -1980	6,082,966,429	6,848,932,929
<sup>2</sup> Fertility Rates-Average number of children per woman of reproductive age based on current age specific fertility rates. Replacement level is 2.1.	NA	NA	1.64	1.62 (2005)
<b>Land Use – note there is a total of 6 million acres of land in Vermont</b>				
<sup>3</sup> Acres of Developed Land	N/A	242,700	331,250	345,200 (2003)
<sup>3</sup> Acres of Crop Land	N/A	648,400	596,500	587,300 (2003)
<sup>3</sup> Acres of Pasture Land	N/A	446,400	328,050	317,800 (2003)
<sup>3</sup> Acres of Forest Land	N/A	4,478,700	4,547,700	4,552,800 (2003)
<sup>3</sup> Ratio of Crop and Pasture Acres to Developed Acres	N/A	4.5 to 1	2.8 to 1	2.6 to 1 (2003)
<sup>4</sup> Acres of Land Protected by Vt. Land Trust	0	8,051	368,197	472,711
<sup>5</sup> Number of Dairy Farms	4,153	3,293	1,640	1,137
<sup>5</sup> Maple Syrup Production-gallons	305,000	500,000	460,000	450,000
<sup>1</sup> Number of Housing Units	165,000	223,198 (1980)	294,382	309,566 (2006)
<sup>1</sup> Vacant Houses - seasonal, recreational, or occasional use	N/A	7,024 (1980)	43,060	N/A

<b>Air Quality</b>				
<sup>6</sup> Number of Registered Motorized Vehicles	374,817	417,066	643,333	716,859
<sup>7</sup> Total Carbon Emissions – million metric tons of CO <sub>2</sub>	N/A	8.14 (1990)	8.87	9.07 (2005)
<sup>8</sup> Total Gigawatt-hours of Electricity Used-depending on how it is generated it affects a variety of resources	2,814	4,321	6,115	6,175
<sup>7</sup> Number of Days of Unhealthy Air for Sensitive Groups	0	5	2	0
<b>Water Quality</b>				
<sup>7</sup> Acid Rain (mean annual pH of precipitation-data from Bennington, Vt.) Unpolluted rain would be 5.6. The pH scale is logarithmic, so a pH of 4.6 is actually 10 times more acidic than a pH of 5.6, and a pH of 3.6 is 100 times more acidic than a pH of 5.6	No data from Vt., Hubbard Brook in NH mean pH was 4.0	4.35	4.42	4.59 (2006)
<sup>7</sup> Calcium-mg/L. Concentration in Rain	N/A	0.21	0.11	0.087
<sup>6</sup> Example of pH data from one acid impaired pond-Haystack Pond in Wilmington	N/A	4.66	4.89	4.83
Calcium-A calcium concentration of 2.5 mg/L or greater (milligrams per liter of water) is necessary for a lake to maintain a healthy biological community.	N/A	0.9	0.66	0.58
<sup>7</sup> Lakes With Milfoil	1	5	50	64
<sup>9</sup> Lake Champlain- Total Non-Native and Invasive Plant and Animal Species – dates approximate	13	16	19	21

<sup>8</sup> Lake Champlain Phosphorus levels - for two areas. A level of less than 14 ug/L (micrograms per liter of water) is desirable. 2007 experienced an unexplained drop.				
Burlington Bay	N/A	19.8	24.4(2001)	12.5
Thompson's Point, Charlotte	N/A	20.4	23.5	12
<b>Wildlife</b>				
<sup>7</sup> Number of Threatened and Endangered Species	N/A	143 (1987)	195	195
<sup>7</sup> Threatened and Endangered Reptiles/Amphibians	N/A	N/A	5/40	7/40
<sup>9</sup> Decline of Bird Species In General- N/A except for Individual species.	"With the changes happening in both Vermont's landscape and the wintering grounds of migratory birds there is a long term decline in the number of many species of birds that breed in Vermont while at the same time some species are increasing. These changes need to be monitored and studied closely both for the conservation of bird populations and for the implications to the overall health of the earth." Steve Faccio, Conservation Biologist, Vermont Center for Eco Studies			
<sup>7</sup> Reintroduction of Species - the peregrine falcon is just one example - number of nesting pairs	N/A	0 (1984)	22	34 (2006)
<b>Forests</b>				
<sup>7</sup> Healthy Maple Tree Percentage	N/A	80	91.2	89.5
<b>Weather</b>				
<sup>11</sup> Average Annual Combined Temperature for Burlington, St. Johnsbury and Woodstock	42.9	43.8	44.2	47.4 (2006)
<sup>11</sup> Average Annual Combined Snowfall for Burlington, St. Johnsbury and Woodstock	84.5	71.9	94.1	44.8 (2006)
<b>Impact on Specific Geographic Regions</b>				
<sup>3</sup> Potash Brook, So. Burlington, Acres of Developed Land	845	1,256	1,811	1,895 (2003)
<sup>3</sup> Potash Brook Watershed - % Developed	20%	31%	44%	46% (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Grand Isle County, Acres of Developed Land	2,905	4,224	5,757	6,072 (2003)
<b>Going Green</b>				
<sup>12</sup> Number of local/regional groups working on sustainable living, buying food locally (localvores) or dealing with peak oil/energy consumption.	0	0	0	27
<sup>13</sup> Number of Town and City Conservation Commissions	0	8 (1987)	64 (1995)	100 (2006)
<sup>14</sup> Total accumulated miles of rail trails, shared use paths, pedestrian facilities and sidewalks, and on-road facilities funded by the Agency of Transportation	0	0	47.9	71.4
<sup>5</sup> Number of Farmers' Markets	N/A	18 (1998)	37	58
<sup>15</sup> Number of Certified Organic Farms	N/A	17 (1985)	212	495
<sup>8</sup> Average Annual KWh Used Per Residential Customer	5,500	8,147	7,177	7,069 (2006)
<sup>16</sup> Number of New Homes Qualifying as ENERGY STAR® Homes and Percent of Market Share	N/A	N/A	252 (10% }	667 (30-31%) (Est.)
<b>Quality of Life Factors</b>				
<sup>7</sup> Acres of Registered Posted Land	106,000	100,489	204,921	227,094
<sup>17</sup> Crime-incarcerated persons per 100,000 population	36	72	218	261
<sup>6</sup> Annual Vehicle Miles of Travel – Traffic Congestion	2.7 billion	3.9 billion	6.6 billion	7.7 billion
<sup>18</sup> Cases of Lyme Disease	N/A	N/A	12	62
Sprawl – N/A	"Change is inevitable and much of it is beneficial. However, we do need to work to protect the basic character and landscape of Vermont. That means as much growth as possible should be channeled to already developed areas so that we can protect our valuable open spaces. This can be done through cooperation between the private sector and government, sharing a common vision." Madeleine May Kunin, Governor of Vermont from 1984-1990			

Light Pollution - N/A	"Increasing amounts of light pollution in all parts of the state help prevent Vermonters and our guests from enjoying the full awe and mystery of a totally dark night sky. This experience should be a part of Vermont life as much as our forests and open spaces." Gary T. Nowak, President Vermont Astronomical Society
Noise Pollution – N/A	"The greatest change to the Vermont soundscape in the last 50 years is the loss of quiet. Along with sprawl, noise has moved into previously quiet rural lands." Les Bloomberg, Executive Director, Noise Pollution Clearinghouse
Crowdedness of Recreation Areas – N/A	"While it is still possible to experience solitude on Vermont's backcountry trails, the opportunities are more limited than they were twenty-five years ago. Camel's Hump, Mt. Mansfield and a few other mountains have always been pretty busy, but even many lesser-known peaks have become popular destinations." Bryant T. Fitzgerald, Past President, Green Mountain Club and Past Chair of the Appalachian Trail Conference
Shore Land Developed – N/A	"Lands along Vermont's waters are increasingly threatened by population growth and the resultant development. Locations along our rivers and lakes are particularly attractive building sites and yet, wildlife, scenic views, recreational access, clean water, and Vermont's quality of life will suffer greatly." Vermont River Conservancy
Beautiful Views Lost or Diminished – N/A	"The natural beauty and scenic landscapes of Vermont contribute not only to our quality of life and our spiritual connection to the natural world, but to our state's economic vitality. In recent decades the aesthetic qualities of the Vermont landscape have been diminished with increased development and poorly planned land uses. The state's extraordinary agricultural open spaces are growing a new crop - large homes and subdivisions - which now populate these fields and meadows and have undermined the beautiful views once associated with them. Our state has transitioned from a rural agricultural pattern to rural residential and the sprawl of structures and associated development threatens to dilute, if not destroy, the integrity of our scenic landscapes." David Raphael, ASLA, Principal of LandWorks Landscape Architects and Planners of Middlebury, Lecturer, Rubenstein School of Natural Resources, UVM
Feeling of Community Diminished – N/A	"Analysis shows that increasing town size accounts for much of the decline in attendance at town meeting we have seen since 1970. The logic is clear. In a small town, your presence at town meeting counts for much more than it does in larger towns. Also, small town people feel more responsibility to participate. Since their lives as citizens are more visible, they are better connected with each other, and they feel more needed by the community." Frank Bryan and Susan Clark in their book, <i>All Those in Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community</i>

\*NA=no data available

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Census Bureau

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

<sup>4</sup>Vt. Land Trust

<sup>5</sup>Vt. Dept. of Agriculture

<sup>6</sup>Vt. Dept. of Motor Vehicles

<sup>7</sup>Vt. Agency of Natural Resources

<sup>8</sup>Vt. Public Service Dept.

<sup>9</sup>Lake Champlain Basin Program

<sup>10</sup>Vt. Center for Eco Studies

<sup>11</sup>Vt. State Climatologist

<sup>12</sup>Vt. Earth Institute and Vt. Peak Oil Network

<sup>13</sup>Vt. Association of Conservation Commissions

<sup>14</sup>Vt. Agency of Transportation

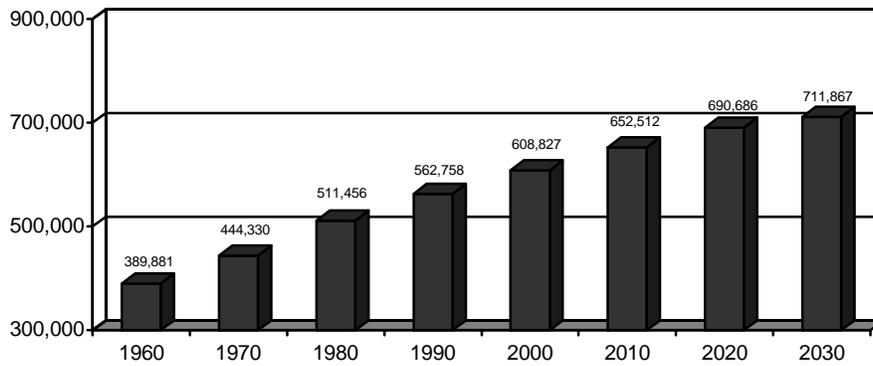
<sup>15</sup>National Organic Farmer's Association

<sup>16</sup>Efficiency Vermont

<sup>17</sup>Vt. Dept. of Corrections

<sup>18</sup>Vt. Dept. of Health

**Vermont Population Growth  
1960 and Census projections to 2030**



George Plumb is a cofounder and the current president of Vermonters for a Sustainable Population. He is retired from being in charge of recreation for the Vt. Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation. He is a long time environmental leader and a cofounder of the Vt. Earth Institute, the Vt. Bicycle and Pedestrian Coalition, and the Vt. Trails and Greenways Council. He moved to Washington, Vermont in 1968 and has watched that community lose its rural qualities as it becomes more suburbanized. He may be reached at [gplumb\(at\)pshift.com](mailto:gplumb(at)pshift.com)

For more information on Vermonters for a Sustainable Population go to [www.vspop.org](http://www.vspop.org)

## **DISAPPEARING VERMONT**

by Jeanette Hurdle

(A Poem in three parts)

### **Sweet Memories**

Sleeping beauty is a tree,  
Up by the old potato piece.

Picking blackberries the size of your thumb,  
Down in Uncle Fred's place.

The desire to cultivate a piece of Earth,  
With lovely fresh edibles.

A huge burl in the old maple you cut for firewood,  
Inspired you to teach me the lyrics to  
One Eyed Purple People Eater.

The cow pasture urged you to belt out,  
You can't roller skate in a buffalo herd.

As I skipped along holding your hand,  
You sang, Daddy don't you walk so fast.  
Slow down some cause you're making me run.

The stilts you crafted from the branches of a maple tree,  
Made for hours of enjoyment.

This is the legacy you left me.  
And I know I can be happy if  
I put my mind to it.

### **Recycled**

It's May.  
Ground split into furrows.  
Harvested rocks.  
A fresh row on a stone wall.

Last year's wrinkly leftovers,  
Cut into seeds.  
Each wedge needs an eye,  
From which new life will sprout.

Drop the seeds into their furrows,

Potato-head soldiers peeping out of their trenches.  
Take cover under a carefully replaced Earthen blanket.

Growth emerging from each hill.  
Industrious children profit from hungry insects.  
Small fingers pluck them from their meal.  
Releasing them into a toxic pool of used motor oil.  
Each asphyxiated body worth a penny.

September arrives.  
Potato harvesting.  
Pull the plants;  
Eager bovine faces await their feast.  
Scurvy potatoes à la corn mash;  
Savored by swine.

Snow blows.  
Dormant Earth regenerates,  
A new crop of rocks.

### **Legacy Prayer**

1969 is the year of my birth,  
I often reflect upon the changes to Vermont and the Earth.  
A fifth generation Vermonter is a label of which I am proud.  
But, I often wonder: Will my nieces and nephew experience the simple pleasures of Vermont which I  
was allowed?  
I worked the land with my family on a small farm in Chelsea.  
The education I received there is part of my legacy.  
Dad was laid to rest in the family plot.  
The deer that tread there share his favorite spot.  
Mom clutches tightly to what remains of the family acreage.  
It's hard to compete with developers for your heritage.  
I pray as I gaze upon the snowy fields.  
May these children know what a good Vermont legacy yields.

Jeanette Hurdle grew up on a small farm in Chelsea, VT, where her family grew much of their own food (vegetables and meat), cut their own firewood and grew potatoes for sale to their neighbors. Her mother resides in the family home built by Jeanette's father's ancestor, Nathan Flint, in 1798. She now lives in Barre, VT. Jeanette's book "Opened from the Inside Out" is available online: [www.lulu.com/content/22667](http://www.lulu.com/content/22667)

**RABBITS**  
by Geof Hewitt

Guy at the church says write one about population  
and all I could see was rabbits,  
red eyes in swelling cages  
and their seeming sole intentions  
to eat and make more rabbits  
as the pellets diminish.

What is so blind about us humans  
that we create messes of our own undoing,  
global warming and whatnot better left  
to future generations  
or hope one of our wars will wipe out half,  
leaving the lucky half unscathed  
by whatever it was got the dead ones,  
and the dead ones not rotting up a pestilence  
nor the leveled buildings and trashed bridges  
prove inconvenient as they start over,  
a little wiser for their brush with death  
or more likely cause it seems to permeate our genes  
and those of our furry friends clawing the cage,  
reducing themselves again by increasing their lot?

Geof Hewitt, Vermont's reigning poetry slam champion, works for the Vermont Department of Education and lives in Calais with his wife Janet. His most recent collection of poems, *Only What's Imagined*, is available at better bookstores or directly from The Kumquat Press, P.O. 51, Calais, VT 05648.