

## Vermonters Connection With The Land: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Endangered Species Restoration – By Kim Royar, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Vt. Fish & Wildlife Dept.

As we celebrate the success of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) currently in its 40<sup>th</sup> year, we are taking stock of the role it has played in the restoration of many fish, wildlife, and plant species across the nation that were on the brink of extinction. At the same time, we should recall that a handful of Vermonters recognized the value and importance of conserving fish and wildlife species and their habitats even before the ESA was conceived.



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The conservation ethic that took root in early Vermont, and spread to the rest of the country, remains a vital part of our state's culture and shared heritage. But it is also important to remember that it grew not out of care, but out of exploitation. After settlement in the late 1700s, prevailing attitudes and the land use practices that came with them led to the extirpation of many of Vermont's native species.

By the mid- to late-1800s, due to the massive clearing of the forests, the siltation and pollution of many of our water bodies, and the unregulated taking of our fish and wildlife, many of the species we cherish most today including white-tailed deer, wild turkey, bald eagles, beaver, salmon, fisher, and many others were essentially extinct.

In 1864, the clarion call for change came from Vermonter George Perkins Marsh, a resident of Woodstock, in his book *Man and Nature*. Marsh recognized that man, like other forms of life, "nourished at the table of bounteous nature," and that by destroying nature, the human population was undermining the very foundation they depended on for survival. Thus Marsh, in the mid-1800s, was one of the first people in the country to introduce the concept of conservation and the sustainable management of our valuable forest and wildlife resources. In 1866, in response to the devastation,

the Vermont legislature appointed a Board of Fish Commissioners, the precursor to the Fish & Wildlife Department, to focus on the restoration of brook and lake trout which they understood required, "pure water."

In the years leading up to the federal act, many of the species we now regularly see including deer, turkey, beaver, fisher, and peregrine falcons were reintroduced to the state. Now, some of those species are more common than they were prior to European settlement. Today, more Vermonters participate in wildlife watching, hunting, and fishing than residents of any other state in the nation, with the exception of Alaska. Thanks to their efforts, and to the effects of state and federal laws and programs, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and other species are making a comeback in the state, providing a richness to our interactions with wild things that cannot be overestimated.

Vermonters' passion for the land and our commitment to conservation has led to the extraordinary successes of the past 100 years. The recovery of these once-endangered species is a testament to the importance of a connection to the land and the water in our cultural heritage and to our long-standing engagement with wild animals and places. These experiences are what separates Vermont from other places and has fostered this proud heritage that has helped to make the Act, and the Vermont efforts before and after it, a success in our state. Maintaining our connection to the land will ensure its success for generations to come.