



Vermont Council on Rural Development

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Everyone is familiar with the concepts that Charles Darwin's controversial theory inspired: that all life descended from a common ancestry, that bio-diversity contributes to species' survival and that a pattern of evolution results from a process called natural selection — also known as the survival of the fittest.

Lately, I've been tracking the history of the environmental movement in Vermont. This has led me to ask if Darwin's theory of evolution might help us understand the movement's past and anticipate its trajectory into the future.

Here's what I've found.

About 50 years ago Vermont had very few statewide environmental groups. Except for the Green Mountain Club and the Vermont Natural Resources Council, they were the regional offices of national organizations, such as the National Wildlife Federation and The Nature Conservancy.

Since then more than 30 statewide, nonprofit environmental and conservation-oriented organizations have formed. Several have not survived and have either merged with other groups or simply closed up shop. Many more local groups have formed, such as watershed associations and energy committees. Much like the abundant varieties of creatures in the Galapagos that Darwin found to be — each filling a different niche, — these environmental organizations may be unified in the overall goal of protecting the quality of the environment — but unique in their means of getting there.

The Vermont environmental movement shares a common ancestry in the conservation ethic of the late nineteenth century exemplified by the works of George Perkins Marsh, John Muir and others. These early efforts inspired many initiatives in the early twentieth century, such as Perry Merrill's conservation of state lands and work by individual citizens — Lucy Bugbee, Laurence Rockefeller and others. By the mid to late century, the Vermont Land Trust and local land trusts were conserving lands in many communities around the state.

During the 1970s, Vermont — along with many other states as well as the federal government — developed methods to augment conservation with regulation. The national Clean Water Act,

Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Vermont's Act 250 were all created to provide more tools for protecting natural resources.

Regulation naturally leads to litigation, in an effort to define the statutes through case law. And the lawsuits abounded throughout the 1980s. By the early 1990s, however, the movement had met with a backlash from the regulated community.

At that time the environmental movement had, in the minds of many, fallen into the category of a lobbying and litigating special interest ? a force seen as separate and apart from the interests of Vermonters. Whether this was true, one thing is certain: It is not what Darwin's theory of evolution would suggest as a survival strategy for the long run.

Toward the end of the 20th century the movement as a whole began to understand the value of inclusivity and started to mend the rifts of this isolating polarization. Institutions were founded that brought unusual partners together, such as the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility and the Vermont Council on Rural Development. Today the coalitions formed by these organizations help bring the perceived special interests of the environmentalists back into the realm of the common good.

From conservation to regulation and litigation, and from confrontation to collaboration, we can see how the evolution of environmentalism could ? and perhaps should for its long-term survival ? build toward a more inclusive, diverse popular movement.

The evolution toward greater connectivity may have brought environmentalism to a transformative moment today. By collaborating with a wide variety of partners with different concerns and interests, the movement might improve its chances of surviving and indeed thriving within the process of natural selection.

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