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A new Thanksgiving tradition for woodland owners

Durham, NH — I spent a week in the Ozarks recently. I felt a little out of place at first, despite being from a small New Hampshire town. Our population of 1,713 doubled or tripled that of the Ozark communities I traveled to.

Even with small towns, small schools, and small opportunity for jobs, the people of the Ozarks are big on some things. They're big on clean water. They're big on forests. They're big on being people of the countryside, living with their land, existing from it while caring for it. In this ethic of conservation I found common ground.

We are conservationists in New Hampshire, too, and there are conservationists in all the rural parts of the Eastern United States I travel for work, from Missouri to Maine to Minnesota, from West Virginia to the Adirondacks. The people of the countryside have grown up with their land and they are the last ones on earth who would see it harmed.

The people of the countryside show you their conservation ethic in many ways. They show it to you by harvesting trees in winter, when the ground is dry, or frozen and snow covered. They show it to you in spring, when seedlings get planted, and in summer, when the firewood gets split and stacked. In autumn especially, one sees country living, called out by the trucks with empty gun racks parked on the roadside from dawn until the workday starts.

Every so often there is call for—and this year we have had—a national dialogue about conservation. Whether the Nation is talking about conservation, or the people of the countryside are talking about it in their kitchens, common themes come through about the importance of wildlife and water and forests and heritage. There is a significant, regrettable difference, though, between the national dialogue and the local discussions. Where the national dialogue speaks of conservation that will hold for generations to come, the woodland-owning families I meet aren't often sure what will happen to their land after they pass on.

Our statisticians categorize the people we work with as private-forest owners, but let's not confuse these owners with lairds and barons. They're mom and pop conservationists. There are millions of them and they own most of the forest in the country. Across the 20 states where I work, they own the majority of woodlands, more than 90 million acres.

Like the planting and the harvest, the scouting and the hunt, most of the rites of the countryside are annual rites. They've become familiar ground for conversation. I'd like to suggest another rite, one for woodland owners that's just in time for Thanksgiving: have the conversation that isn't happening often enough. As you and your heirs reunite now and through the New Year,

talk about what will happen with your family's land a generation and more down the road. Talk about what your legacy will be and the steps you'll take to get there. It's a conversation that you must have, and what you decide is critical to all of us.

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