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**From the Selected Works of Madeleine K. Charney**

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April, 2006

## Conference Keynoter Defends Practices Buried in New England's Agricultural History, Plans for Future

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## [NOFA Mass News, April - May 2006](#)

### **Conference Keynoter Defends Practices Buried in New England's Agricultural History, Plans for Future**

**Madeleine Charney  
Granby**

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Care for an enlightening glance back toward Concord, Mass. in Colonial times? Brian Donahue, environmental historian, can take you there. An environmental professor at Brandeis University and Environmental Historian at Harvard Forest, Donahue is also author of *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (Yale University Press, 1999). He is also founder of Land's Sake, a community farm in suburban Weston, Mass. operated in conjunction with the town's conservation commission to provide education for children centered in agricultural stewardship.

On Jan. 21, Donahue delivered a thought provoking keynote address at the NOFA Winter Conference. His talk debunked the myths of early New England farming practices, the longstanding notion that colonials by habit overfarmed, that their husbandry inherently degraded the land and neglected manure as a fertilizer. The picture he painted was that Concord farmers carried out local production with remarkable success and sustainability until economic and social forces undercut the environmental balance they had nurtured.

It's true, he admitted, that by 1850, Concord was 90% deforested and contained mostly degraded pastures. Farmers led lives of quiet desperation with many heading toward bankruptcy. Agricultural journals of the time echoed this downward spiral. Crude methods needed improvement, but as Henry David Thoreau pointed out, the root of the problem was society's avarice and not farmers' misguided practices. Commercial agriculture was taking too much from the land. However, Donahue's research reveals that Colonial Concord did have some farms that were fighting this tide and were continuing to manage their land in an ecologically balanced manner.

Donahue posed the question, "What does the history of agriculture tell us about stewardship and preservation? What are the cultural roots of a land ethic?" He challenged the attendees to draw inspiration from wild nature, native Americans and early European farmers. A misunderstanding of New England environmental history "tends to paralyze us into rigid forms of preservation and restoration."

He gave the current example of keeping open spaces through mowing and cutting back trees all the way to the stone walls. Many citizens balk at this "destruction" of a "natural area." However, he noted, this is an excellent control of the deer population. After 12 generations of farmers in 300 years, he perceives the deer as encroaching on humans' territory.

He cited the typical environmentalist's attitude that, "Everything we touch gets degraded. We make messes." But should everything in nature be left alone or restored to pre-European condition? Donahue answers his own questions with a resounding, "No." Most people, he observes, are attracted to the agrarian landscape. But their conscience tries to contradict, insisting that "Wild is good, not this degraded land." It's the tired story of the New England land history: natives living in harmony in nearly pristine nature, English arrive, natives displaced due to Europeans' greed, landscape is deformed. While there is truth to the story, Donahue identified several problems therein.

Donahue paints the picture that native people numbered about 100,000 with about one cultivated acre per soul. These 100,000 acres made up only a small percentage of the 9 million acres in southern New England. Species composition was changed through deer hunting, agriculture, fires and clearing by natives. Meanwhile, the Europeans' agrarian practice of mixed husbandry got folded into the story. Their carefully maintained wetlands, using hay, cross drains and deliberate flooding, resulted in intensive production. Herds of cattle were run through, their manure adding fertilizer for the corn that

followed. Woodland was protected through rotational cutting, thereby increasing the diversity of local resources. Accompanying these practices were the social expectations of inheriting land within families and maintaining good relations with community members.

Radical changes and associated problems were brought on by rapid expansion and the market revolution of the 19th century with commodification of the food supply. Importation, for example, outweighed export. People wanted wheat flour instead of corn and rye. Pastures were expanded at this point. Thoreau's plea to preserve 1/10 of the landscape went unheard. Farming became market driven, with too few restraints. Not allowing the market to dictate activities is the key to stewardship, states Donahue. His formula for success includes 1/10 wild lands, sustainable agricultural use and diverse, well-managed woodlands.

To this end, Donahue offered a bevy of proposals to lay a foundation for positive change. Less of the state's forest should be protected, he said—50% instead of the current 63%, with more of it made up of conservation easements (50% instead of the current 25%), and farmland comprising 7%. He posited that protection of the land base is the most important direction for government subsidies and that subsidies should reward ecologically sound production. Conservation decision making must involve citizenry on town, local and state levels in the use of public lands; involving children on the land is a key to the continuity of stewardship. Environmentalists, he said, need new ideas for protecting land in an active manner; they need a fresh approach to the evolving history of land use. Society—and its conservation component—can't be organized around the production of "cheap, crude food," he emphasized. Responsible, local production will be the path toward a habitable world. Donahue speculated that the driving force behind this positive transformation is likely to be scarcity of resources.

Donahue concluded with a call for the protection of common land and the establishment of community farms—especially in the suburbs, where most Americans live and where environmentalists may make a significant, lasting difference on the land.

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