

Here and There: Regarding the Wind

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By William Shutkin

Ever since we cut down a white pine plantation on the north side of our property several years ago, the wind hasn't stopped howling. Though we lie in the shadow of a small chain of hills in the Green Mountain National Forest, all it took was the creation of a small clearing around our farmhouse to reveal just how windy the North Woods are. Countless nights I've been awakened by the sounds of our old 12-over-12 windows chattering like teeth, their decrepit glass and glazing courageously holding their own against the incessant gales.

These days, I'm not the only one regarding the wind. All across the region, from Tug Hill to Maine, the talk is of wind farms. Not surprisingly, with each proposal has followed a wave of protests by neighbors and others claiming that wind turbines on mountaintops, no matter how sleek or environmentally virtuous, are a blight on a pristine landscape, an unholy trade-off of aesthetic beauty for renewable power.

Though wind energy comprises less than one percent of the nation's power supply, the push by entrepreneurs, state and local governments, and grassroots activists to increase the production and use of renewables like wind, solar, and biomass is an important signal that many Americans are coming to realize that our dependence on nineteenth-century fuels like oil and coal, almost two-thirds of which come from outside the U.S., is not only bad for the environment but also threatens our economy and security.

Most of our power comes from large, centralized power plants that burn fossil fuels shipped in from far away to service a grid of users spread across a vast territory. By contrast, renewable power depends on the energy sources indigenous to a particular area. Accordingly, this more decentralized, place-based system forces citizens to reckon with their energy needs in ways they've never had to, by moving the energy source itself, and not merely the energy consumption, closer to home – along Route 9, or on Mt. Equinox, or Glebe Mountain, or the Lowell Mountain range. This can be very discomfiting, as the string of wind farm controversies shows.

Beyond the contested aesthetic, environmental, and economic issues associated with almost any development project, the most important question raised by wind farms is essentially a civic one: how do individuals and, by turn, communities make pattern-changing decisions, in both public policy and personal attitudes, to shift from the status quo to a better, more just, and more environmentally sound future? Debates about wind energy and other renewables are important because they compel us as locals at least to consider, if not to act on, the public interest as it plays out across several scales – from the nearby mountaintop to thousands of miles away – and to begin to think like citizens, beyond the narrow “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) stance that has become the default for most communities facing any and all new development proposals. Importantly, renewable energy is one of the few areas of our post-industrial, global capitalist culture where place – local place – still matters a lot. It depends first and foremost on local resources – natural, political, and social. Without them, there is no renewable energy future.

Now NIMBYism is in theory a good thing, a byproduct of a robustly pluralistic and open society where many voices can be heard. The trouble is, not all NIMBYism is created equal. Some is more powerful, louder than others, especially when affluent and well-connected individuals are involved. Ideally, all communities would have the same NIMBY power, the same access to the legal, political, and financial resources that make for successful NIMBY campaigns. This would mean that poor communities, the same ones who often live near older, dirty power plants, the same ones who end up sending their sons and daughters to fight wars over resources like oil, would be less vulnerable to these unwanted perils, more equal vis-à-vis their wealthier fellow citizens. In this ideal world, in turn, there would be no place left to site such polluting facilities (except in other countries, but that's another story), and communities would be forced to develop better, cleaner alternatives. But we don't live in this world, this country. We live instead in a place where the playing field is anything but level, where the people and communities who have lived at safe remove from dirty power plants and other hazards can also oppose greener alternatives, resulting in the perpetuation of distributional inequities.

New Englanders have proved to be among the most public-spirited of Americans, with wind farms but the latest test in a long line of civic challenges. As with any difficult public policy issue, there are no simple answers, only hard choices, hard work, and perseverance. My bet is that we in the Northeast will figure wind farms out – will build them in some places, not in others. And that's okay. The key is that we actually join the issue, engage as citizens in the tough decision making it demands, and come out the other end ready for the next challenge.

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