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## Mires: Nothing new under the sun, 10-07-08

 By [Peter Mires](#)

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There's been a lot of buzz lately about alternatives to finite fossil fuels. Solar energy, for example, is seen as a viable power source for our planet. After all, by some estimates the sun sends us 28,000 times more energy annually than we presently consume from all other sources. In addition, incoming solar radiation is free, it's not controlled by a cartel and the supply is not running out for a long, long time.

The use of solar energy is nothing new. As a human geographer, I recognize that people have been using the power of the sun for millennia. It has influenced the placement of settlements and crops, and even the orientation of individual houses and the location of windows have been determined by the sun's rays. Although modern technological innovations— photovoltaic cells and batteries — have permitted more efficient capture and storage, the use of passive solar energy is a time-honored tradition in some societies.

Referring to Alpine Europe, geographer Roderick Peattie observed, "The matter of sunlight is so important that each mountain speech or dialect has its special terms for sunny and shady slopes." In French, for example, the terms *adret* and *ubac* apply to sunny and shady mountain slopes, respectively. His 1930s study of settlement patterns in the east-west trending valleys of the French Alps found that approximately nine out of every 10 houses were situated on the *adret*. He concluded that people tend to "live in the sun."

Thirty years ago, I hiked Vermont's "Long Trail" from the Massachusetts state line to the Canadian border (263 miles). Although I didn't know about Peattie's work at the time, I too noticed the preponderance of old farmsteads on south-facing slopes. They were, in essence, tilted toward the sun. Geography's agenda is often described as "the why of where," and following that month-long sojourn in the Green Mountains I decided to investigate the environmental adaptations of 19th-century Vermont farmers. In the library, I read passages in town histories that praised the productivity of farms situated on a southerly slope. I learned that Vermont farmers would place more windows on the sunny side of their house, and those were generally the rooms most used by the family. I even found a poem by Robert Frost that acknowledges the difference between sunny and shady slopes. It has to do with the best placement of an apple orchard.

"I don't want it stirred by the heat of the sun.  
 (We made it secure against being, I hope,  
 By setting it out on the northerly slope.)  
 No orchard's the worse for the wintriest storm;  
 But one thing about it, it mustn't get warm.  
 'How often already you've had to be told,  
 Keep cold, young orchard. Good-bye and keep cold.  
 Dread fifty above more than fifty below.'"

After some quality time in the library stacks (in those laborious but happy days before Internet search engines), I returned to the Green Mountains to reconnoiter. With the help of map and compass (ditto the era before GPS), I plotted the location of a couple hundred farmsteads in central Vermont. My results confirmed Peattie's dictum that people "live in the sun," especially in mountainous terrain at this latitude.

With a concern today for adopting more energy-efficient lifestyles, many people are rediscovering successful environmental adaptations from the past. As is often the case, a new term for an old concept stimulates conversation, so if your architect starts talking "equator-facing fenestration" you'll nod knowingly and recall the wisdom of old farmers. There is clearly a lesson in looking at how others have used something as transparent as sunshine.

Dr. Peter Mires teaches geography at the University of Delaware. He is a Fellow of the American Geographical Society and a member of the society's Writers Circle. He can be reached at [pmires@UDel.edu](mailto:pmires@UDel.edu). The Robert Frost poem is in a collection entitled *New Hampshire* (Henry Holt, New York, 1923).

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