A PLACE FOR WINDMILLS:

It was the best of places. It was the worst of places. That's what Charles Dickens might have said about wind power development in a tale of two landscapes, offshore Nantucket and the Berkshires, respectively.

I'm in favor of the Cape Wind project near Nantucket, Mass., where developers hope to cluster 130 giant turbines six miles offshore to meet statewide goals for electrical production from sources other than nuclear or fossil fuel. But I'm opposed to a similar installation along the spine of New England's western mountains, variously known as the Taconic Mountains in New York, the Litchfield Hills in Connecticut, the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts and the Green Mountains of Vermont.

This is not a NIMBY response for me because I have no personal attachment to either place. I'm simply weighing in on an interesting conflict that I've watched for years, responding more with my heart than with my head. In this case, landscape aesthetics, rather than economics or convenience, should guide development decisions.

I add nothing to the gigabytes of quantitative data involving wind statistics, the level of unwanted noise, the number of birds or bats getting clubbed by the enormous turbine blades or the impact on marine life caused by unusual vibrations or electric fields. These issues are addressed for the Cape Wind Project in a report released last November by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, one that involved 16 other federal, state and local agencies.

Nantucket Island, Martha's Vineyard, Cape Cod and New Bedford are landmarks for the Age of Sail. Wind power drove their economies. Besides filling sails, wind also powered nearly a thousand windmills used to grind grain, to pump salt water for the salt industry and to pump fresh water in a sandy land where surface springs and streams are uncommon.

Windmills are so vital to the visual heritage that modern ones are being constructed to seduce tourists. My favorite photo of Block Island, titled "View from Beacon Hill with Two Windmills, 1884," is reminiscent of Old World islands in coastal Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany.

Despite the modern advantages of electricity and plumbing, wind remains important to the economy of New England's sandy southern coast. It cools the local landscape and powers the recreational sailing industry. As for complaints about the noise of wind turbines, wind-generated background noise is nearly constant at sea. Can a turbine be heard while under full sail? As for complaints about the distant view, how different would be the sight of a group of turbines from a fleet of sailboats six miles in the distance?

Now pan your mind's eye to the other side of the Bay State, to the Berkshires. This is a land of quiet country farms that gradually morphed into rural retreats for the city-weary. Though this is also a land of leisure-time wealth, the landscape ambience is completely different. For most of the year, it's a quiet, visually muted, forested scene unlike the seascape's stark visual contrasts of sparking water, white sand and brown boulders. The purplish buds of early spring morph into soft greens of true spring, then to the dark greens of midsummer.

At first frost or thereabouts, the dimmer switch in charge of color is cranked up to the yellow-red tones of autumn, then back down to the drab of no leaves at all. Without foliage, tree trunk, branch, lesser branch and twig rule the color spectrum, especially when intensified by snow. Except for roads and buildings, tumbled walls of tarnished stone are often the brightest colors around.
In such a Berkshire scene, a stand of stark, giant metal whirligigs on a ridgeline would look as out of place as a regatta of sailboats stranded in the forest. The rhythmic whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of the turbine blades spinning would sound as out of place as sailcloth luffing in the wind.

The more turbines located offshore, the better, provided that marine life is minimally affected.