

Puzzling Out Land Conservation

By Mirka Zapletal, Newfound Lake Region Association

Working to protect a watershed's natural, social, and economic resources means that we are constantly thinking about the many different ways that people interact with the area. While some are excited to launch their boats and make some waves, others are looking forward to a quiet snowshoe in the future, and still others are complaining about the seasonal traffic on their way to work. The balance between these differing perspectives influences how and what a community chooses to preserve and can create competing visions of what the future should look like.

Land conservation planning at the watershed level can help those competing goals find common ground and work together to benefit multiple stakeholders because it isn't focused on a single aim. The watershed conservation process is a puzzle with many moving parts and differently-shaped pieces that can be assembled in different ways. That flexibility means that a variety of community hopes, worries, and conditions can be addressed through planning that looks at the big picture as well as the individual pieces.

The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF) divides land conservation efforts into several large categories based on outcome: drinking water protection, farmland protection, forest protection, habitation protection, and recreational opportunities. Based on these categories, anyone who drinks water and eats food can be impacted by land conservation, and those that venture outside to encounter plants and animals or relax can benefit even more. Analysis by the Trust for Public Land found that every \$1 invested in land conservation returned \$11 in natural goods and services to the New Hampshire economy; supported forestry, agriculture, and commercial fishing; helped maintain a vibrant travel and recreation industry; and contributed to the quality of life for New Hampshire residents.

Just as land conservation provides a wide range of benefits to communities, communities and community members have many ways to support conservation efforts. The vast majority (98 %; 1,817,399 acres which includes White Mountain National Forest) of protected land in New Hampshire is in fee ownership and owned directly by a conservation buyer or under conservation easement where current and future landowners are restricted in what they can do. The remaining acreage is protected by a host of other designations including deed restrictions, community requirements that open space be set aside as land is developed, and flowage easements- federal rights to flood or submerge land, for example as water control measures. Not all of these methods result in permanent, irrevocable conservation, but each parcel of land adds to the mosaic of protected areas that spreads across a watershed and preserves the nature of a place for humans and wildlife. When communities look at the entire watershed as a connected whole, think about recent trends in land change, consider wildlife movement through the landscape, and develop shared goals for the future, they can craft a conservation plan that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Part of helping communities see the possibilities is getting everyone outside in a number of ways. In our efforts to preserve the Newfound Watershed, the Newfound Lake Region Association partners with local

conservation commissions; hosts events for residents and visitors; and has mapped land, water, and development within the watershed to look for patterns and gaps. And working as part of the Newfound Land Conservation Partnership (NLCP), a collaboration between local stakeholders that strives to balance land development with conservation, we're encouraging people to see what land conservation can look like. This summer NLCP is leading a series of conservation hikes throughout the Newfound Watershed that helps people directly experience this area that we enjoy and work to protect and also exposes them to the different ways that land can be conserved. From state forests to family farms, there is no one way to practice land conservation, and land conservation doesn't come only from landowners who want to keep their land completely untouched. By getting people out on trails through protected land around Newfound, we show them the variety of ways to contribute and also remind them exactly what is being conserved. Then we can look at the different puzzle pieces that the community brings to the table and build a comprehensive vision that works for the watershed. Find more information about NLCP at Newfoundlake.org/nlcp and sign up for a conservation hike or other Newfound Watershed activity at Newfoundlake.org/events.