



A Plan for for Sustaining New Hamp

By Paul Doscher

WHAT IMAGE COMES TO MIND when you hear the words “Lakes Region?” Is it a glistening lake with loons calling in the distance? Is it casting a line with kids on a calm summer morning? Or boating over the broad expanses of the “big lake”? Perhaps it’s the view from Mt. Major, Belknap, or Gunstock. Chances are that any image you have includes clear, clean, and abundant water surrounded by a landscape of green trees and fields.

The region’s extraordinary natural beauty and resources are its greatest assets—but these assets also put the region at risk. New Hampshire’s famous lakes remain a major economic driver within both the region and the state, contributing to the economic base through recreation, tourism, and real estate revenues.

Development—some of it well-planned, and some not—has an impact upon both the quality of the water and the surrounding land. Those impacts are magnified when the land in question has provided a home and habitat for moose, bear, otter, waterfowl, and other wildlife, or when it overlays critical aquifers where groundwater is recharged.

For many years, a number of conservation and other organizations throughout New Hampshire have taken steps to ensure that these landscapes and the lakes they surround remain in the future of the Lakes Region. Many thousands of acres have been protected by the landowners, municipalities, land trusts, and public agencies. Those conserved acres make a significant contribution to securing the clean streams, wetlands, rivers, lakes, and ponds that are the lifeblood of central New Hampshire’s famous lakes.

Conservation groups have formed to protect some of the Lake's Region's visual landmarks, such as Red Hill, Green Mountain, the Squam Range, and the Belknap Range pictured here. Photo by Jerry and Marcy Monkman, EcoPhotography.

shire's Lakes Region



The Belknap Mountains rise from the south shore of Lake Winnepesaukee at sunset. Conserving the mountains surrounding the lakes not only protects the visual integrity of the landscape, but also the quality of the lake water. Photo by Joyce El Kouarti.



Left: Development—some of it well-planned, and some not—has an impact upon both the quality of the land and the surrounding water. Photo by Joyce El Kouarti.

Right: Newfound Lake in Hebron is one of New Hampshire's most pristine lakes. Photo by Joyce El Kouarti.

changed. Soon soil maps were available electronically, and other resources and information followed. Before long, even aerial photographs were digital and could be used in combination with computer generated maps. Today, the library of digital landscape data is enormous and growing rapidly. We now have scientific research about forestry, ecology, and water quality that enables us to focus our conservation efforts on those lands that provide the greatest benefits to our communities. Our ability to gather information, combine it, slice it, dice it, and generate maps that show the co-occurrence of various natural resources on a selected acre of land is simply unprecedented.

Regional Distinctions

These new tools have enabled us to become more strategic in our selection process. We now have the ability to proactively identify the best conservation features within a landscape and define priorities. In recent years, the Forest Society has worked with many partners to apply this prioritization process to the development of regional land conservation plans for the Coastal area of the state, the bi-state Quabbin-to-Cardigan (Q2C) region, and the Merrimack River Valley.

But different locales have different priorities. In the Q2C region, stakeholders of both western New Hampshire and north central Massachusetts place a premium upon the large tracts of working forest lands for which the region is renowned. New Hampshire's Coastal Conservation Plan focuses upon the land surrounding rivers and other water bodies that drain into the Atlantic Ocean. Along the more densely developed Merrimack River Valley that winds through Concord, Manchester, and Nashua, the parcels that border the Merrimack River and the fertile soils left behind by the river's flooding are the stars of the show.

So, which is better: 2,000 acres of working forest in the Quabbin-to-Cardigan region, or a 150-acre farm in the Merrimack Valley? Understanding the conservation priorities within a given region enables conservation planners to make informed comparisons between potential land protection projects within that area. The value of the smaller farm may be less apparent to those who prize the vast forested landscapes of the western part of the state. To the residents of Merrimack River Valley cities, however, 2,000-acre

blocks of undeveloped land within city limits are just a memory. But the smaller farm and the larger forest both rise to the top when compared with other similar properties within their respective regions. Regional plans help us identify conservation priorities beyond just acreage goals.

Setting Conservation Priorities in the Lakes Region

The current regional conservation planning priority is the Lakes Region. The landscape's dramatic topography plays a role in directing the focus of conservation efforts within the area.

"What makes the Lakes Region unique within New Hampshire is that it has these vast visually open areas—the lakes—that provide vantage points for distant viewsapes defined by surrounding mountains," said Tom Howe, senior director of land conservation at the Forest Society, who works on land conservation projects in the Lakes Region.

No doubt, it's the visual character of the area that helps people know when they are in the Lakes Region. The myriad elements that create the visual landscape: forests, ponds, lakes, bogs, rivers, farms and hills, are the stuff of conservation planning. All of these, arranged in the unique configuration that is the Lakes Region, are elements that can be quantified, identified, and mapped in a manner that helps identify which places are the most important to preserving the fabric of the area.

To craft a plan that is realistic and reflects community priorities, a group of stakeholders from the area must be involved. In the Lakes Region, that group is the Forest Society, Lakes Region Conservation Trust, Squam Lakes Conservation Society, Green Mountain Conservation Group, Newfound Lake Region Association, the Nature Conservancy, Lakes Region Planning Commission, and the NH Fish and Game Department, as well as individual communities.

"While New Hampshire communities cherish their independence, natural resources and wildlife habitat do not follow town boundaries," said Martha Twombly, Newfound Lake Region Association program director. "By taking a regional perspective and collaborating, towns and non-profits doing this work can be more focused and effective in successfully conserving the most important areas."



In the Lakes Region, vast visually open areas—the lakes—provide vantage points for distant viewscapes defined by surrounding mountains, such as the Ossipee Mountains and White Mountains that rise above Dan Hole Pond in Tuftonboro.

Photo by Joyce El Kouarti.

The Lakes Region Conservation Plan builds upon and supports the existing work completed by individual communities and conservation groups like the Newfound Lake Region Association and others, then seeks to bridge the gap between these local plans and statewide initiatives, such as the NH Department of Fish and Game's Wildlife Action Plan and the Forest Society's New Hampshire Everlasting vision. The local plans influence statewide priorities, and vice versa.

Each group participating in the Lakes Region Plan brings its own set of conservation priorities to the table, and each gets a vote in how the various layers of conservation data (such as soils, forest blocks, high value habitat, aquifers, etc.) are weighted in the priority setting process. That process is called a "Delphi analysis." In effect, it's a voting mechanism where each group assigns each resource value points. When all the votes are in, the weighting of

combination of steep slopes and highly erodible soils have the potential to compromise water quality; ergo, these features were highlighted as conservation priorities. Forest blocks ranging from 250 acres to more than 10,000 acres in size also play an important role in both the quality and quantity of the water in the region's undeveloped watersheds. The Plan also incorporates unique data on high quality stream watersheds from US Geological Service, as well as the locations of impaired waters mapped by the NH Department of Environmental Services.

Ground water quality was another conservation priority. The Ossipee Watershed includes the largest stratified drift aquifer in New Hampshire. "This important groundwater resource for the Lakes Region is at the heart of Green Mountain Conservation Group's mission," said Susan Slack, acting executive director of the Green Mountain Conservation Group (GMCG). "This is one of the conservation values that will be incorporated into the Plan, which will in turn help guide GMCG's conservation efforts."

The new Lakes Region Conservation Plan is nearing completion. When finished, it will be a tool for each of the participating organizations to prioritize its land protection efforts. It can help inform municipalities as they develop their own open space conservation plans or evaluate proposed development projects. The plan will live in the computer systems of conservation groups and help guide regional decision making for years. That's a tool that is really useful and helps ensure that, decades from now, when we look back, the view we'll see will include the same images we have today of clean and abundant water and green hillsides.

Paul Doscher is the Vice President of Land Conservation at the Forest Society.

Special thanks to Kenn Ortmann of Rochester, NH for flying our Forest Society staff over the Lakes Region for an aerial photo shoot.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Green Mountain Conservation Group (www.gmcg.org)

Lakes Region Conservation Trust (www.lrct.org)

Lakes Region Planning Commission (www.lrpc.org)

Newfound Lake Region Association (www.newfoundlake.org)

NH Everlasting (www.forestsociety.org/aboutus/nh-everlasting.asp)

NH Fish and Game Department

(http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Wildlife/wildlife_plan.htm)

Squam Lakes Association (www.squamlakes.org)

Squam Lakes Conservation Society (www.squamlakes.com)

The Nature Conservancy (www.tnc.org)

UNH Complex Systems GRANIT program (www.granit.unh.edu)