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Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project

A conservation vision for Vermont's most populated region

By Mark Aiken

Twelve years ago, Sue Morse held a meeting in her living room in Jericho. In attendance were concerned neighbors and conservation leaders from Jericho, Underhill, Richmond, and Bolton. The topic of discussion? An area of land rich in biodiversity and wildlife that comprised parts of these four communities. Everyone's concern? The inevitable development of this land, which could disrupt critical habitat.

"I have been doing research here for 37

years," said Sue, founder of Keeping Track, a nonprofit dedicated to inspiring community participation of long-term wildlife stewardship. "I knew how important this land is, and I knew there were many people in the adjoining towns who felt likewise." The area provides core habitat for bobcat, bear, and moose, peregrine falcons, and many other wildlife species.

The area in question stretches from two of Vermont's highest mountaintops on either side through the Winooski River Valley in the middle. The area is surrounded by the

40,000-acre Mount Mansfield State Forest on the northeast, the 20,000-acre Camel's Hump State Park on the south, and the 11,000-acre Jericho Firing Range on the north. "Too often, citizens wait until the last minute to try to save a place," Sue said.

Not in this case. The meeting in Sue's living room was the seed that became the Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project—an initiative that brought organizations and citizens together to define priorities based on science, to adopt a vision for the region as a whole, and then to work with willing landowners. "Fortunately, the Vermont Land Trust rallied around and supported the idea," Sue said. Today, private landowners, towns, and many organizations have worked to conserve some 8,000 acres. "Something this big needs to bring to the table all of the stakeholders," Sue said. "We're all in this together."

The Partnership includes more than 14 local groups, town commissions, conservation organizations, and statewide agencies working together to conserve the wildlife habitat, ecological integrity, timber resources, and recreational opportunities in the Chittenden County Uplands. "It is the diversity in what this landscape provides, all in close proximity to Vermont's largest population centers, that makes it so important to so many people," said Bob Heiser, Champlain Valley project manager for Vermont Land Trust.



Hikers at Libby's Look in Bolton gaze west toward Lake Champlain. The trail leading to the lookout runs through the Preston Pond Conservation Area, an area that offers recreation, wildlife habitat, and timber resources.

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Protecting Forest Resources

The land that provides habitat for wildlife also supports the wood products economy. Most parcels protected in the Uplands will remain privately owned with the ability for continued forest management—protecting large swaths of wildlife habitat and at the same time ensuring a continued contribution to Vermont's land-based economy. "My family is proud that we've been able to protect our legacy," said Wright Preston of Richmond. "This land has been in our family for over 60 years."

As a child growing up in Burlington, Wright spent time exploring the woods and forests on his grandparents' property in Richmond. While Wright uncovered the wonders of nature, his grandfather was concerned with responsibly managing the land so that his grandchildren and future generations could continue to enjoy it. Wright's grandparents eventually passed the land to Prelco, the corporation held by their heirs.

In 2006, Wright and his family members ensured their grandfather's legacy of stewardship when they worked with the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and VLT to sell



Bear scratches on a beech tree located on Wright Preston's family's land in Richmond.



Sue Morse

The Uplands area provides core habitat for animals such as bobcat, moose, and bear.

conservation and public access easements on Prelco's 1,700-acre parcel. "I remember walking the land with a forester," Wright said. "I knew that as this land transfers into the next generation, there would be pressure to develop—to convert forestland into cash." Sure enough, even as Prelco and VLT talked of conservation, would-be developers were calling.

The purchase of the conservation easement on Wright's land was funded by the federal Forest Legacy Program, a program created through the leadership of Senator Patrick Leahy in 1990. These funds made it possible to conserve many Chittenden County Uplands properties.

The work doesn't end with the sale of a conservation easement. Wright and his family have continued their grandfather's work. "We have, over many years, developed a forest management plan," Wright said. With the help of state foresters and other consulting foresters, the plan has been updated and amended over time with the approval of the Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, which holds the easement. "Our goal is to maintain a forest that is sustainable from a forestry and economic perspective, that can be used by the community, and, most of all, can also be used as habitat by the wildlife and animals who live there," said Wright.

A Community Effort

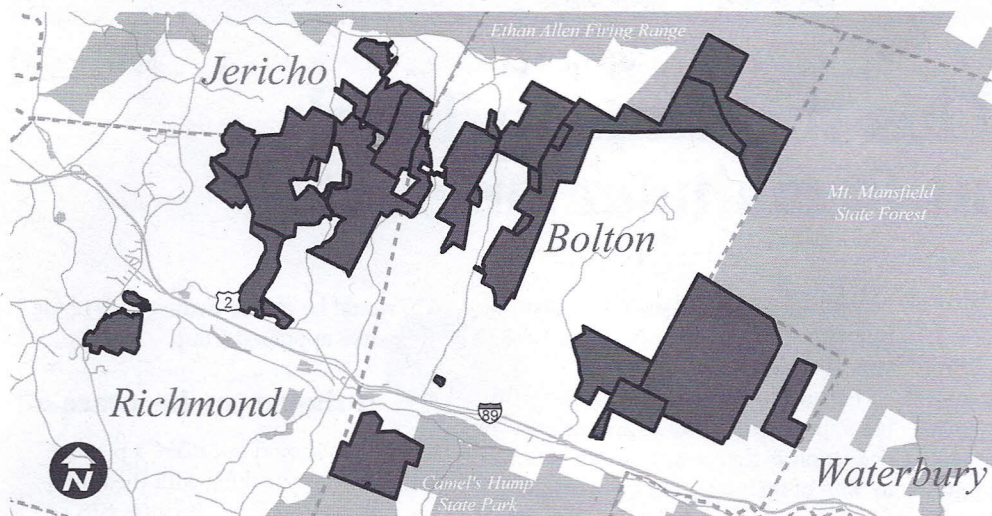
One of the project's early successes was the purchase and conservation of Preston Pond and the surrounding 400 acres in Bolton. In 2003, the Bolton Conservation Commission worked closely with VLT and The Nature Conservancy to develop the conservation project. A major fundraising effort followed that included grants from the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board and private foundations, donations from many individuals, and a decision by residents of Bolton to allocate town money to the conservation project.

"The core of the land that became the Preston Pond Conservation Area was still intact and included the Upper and Lower Preston Ponds," said Lars Botzojourns, who served on Bolton's Conservation Commission at the time of the Preston Pond acquisition. "It's not a huge area, but one thing that was notable was that it was an intact watershed."

In addition to the 3,500-year-old pond, the forested property contains a rare stand of red pines, peregrine falcon nesting sites, and miles of trails, including a section of the Long Trail. The land is also home to bobcat, fisher, moose, otter, and mink.

Moving forward, the town of Bolton may benefit from logging and other responsible land management of the parcel. Meanwhile, Bolton residents and visitors will enjoy recreational access to

Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Area



Land protected by the Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project is shaded in dark grey. To date, around 8,000 acres have been conserved.

Preston Pond forever. “[The Chittenden County Uplands] is a recreational mecca: pretty outstanding opportunities for hiking and rock climbing, skiing,” said Lars. “And it’s not just the passive recreation: snowmobiling (the VAST Trail goes through here), hunting—there’s a pretty large constituency of people who just want to be outdoors.”

Getting on the Land

For many who live nearby or visit the Uplands, getting out on the land that defines Vermont is what inspires them. Photographer and writer Berne Broudy of Richmond believes that her town’s identity is tied to the open spaces within and around it. “It is impossible to separate the two,” said Berne, citing the Long Trail through-hikers who pass through her town and the local cyclists, hikers, and skiers who meet at the bakery in Richmond before heading on outdoor adventures.

Those that play on, and use, the land for recreation have also adopted roles in the Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project. The Green Mountain Club, the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, and the Catamount Trail Association maintain trails through the region. Recreation is important to Vermont’s economy, and outdoor enthusiasts have accepted responsibility.

For example, rock climbers have great interest in the Chittenden County Uplands, which is home to several climbing sites. “There are just not that many places to climb in Vermont; to lose

even one would be significant,” said Travis Peckham, board member for CRAG-VT (Climbing Resource Access Group). When the land that included a beloved cliff in Bolton changed hands 10 years ago, concerned climbers got involved. “At first we worked with landowners to ensure access,” Travis said. As the group gained momentum and learned, they began working towards acquisition of climbing areas.

Today, CRAG-VT owns cliffs on four small VLT-conserved parcels within the Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project area. The organization works with biologists to ensure that trails leading to the cliffs are placed properly, taking account of endangered plants. It also builds information kiosks and holds

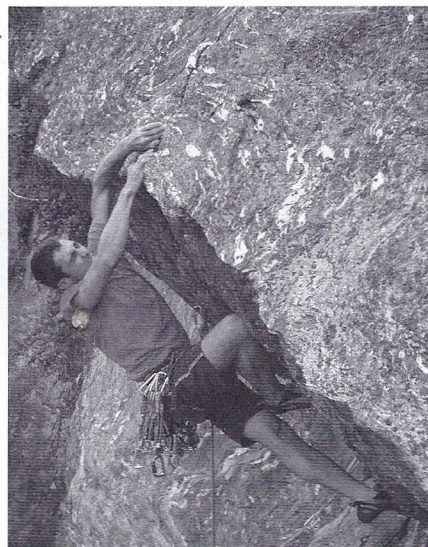
clean-up days.

Berne Broudy is a member of CRAG-VT, and she has volunteered for the Conservation Alliance, the Fellowship of the Wheel, and the Catamount Trail Association. She sees the work of all these organizations—including the Vermont Land Trust—as vital. “They are preserving the soul of the state,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to live here if these open and natural spaces weren’t such an integral part of Vermont.”

The Chittenden County Uplands Conservation Project started in Sue Morse’s living room, but it spread. Still, however, she sees the need for more research, particularly in the valley, where wildlife has I-89, Route 2, and a railroad to cross, and could possibly benefit from a wildlife overpass. Meanwhile, Bob Heiser hopes to continue to work with interested landowners and owners of high-priority parcels—that is, parcels that provide important wildlife habitat, natural areas, and productive forestland, or that or that serve the ever-growing recreational needs of Vermont’s largest population center. “We’ll continue to work on more funding and with donors of conservation easements in order to conserve core and connective habitat to help secure the work we’ve already accomplished,” Bob said.

Sue likes how a grassroots movement grew to include many partners. “It’s intrinsically American,” Sue said. “Multiple organizations, multiple packages, all coming together with solutions. It’s exciting—and it works.”

Paul Hansen/Ecopixel



“There are just not a lot of places to climb in Vermont; to lose one would be significant,” said Travis Peckham, pictured above.