



Community Forest Case Study:

Canaan Town Forest

The Vermont Land Trust (VLT) holds the conservation easement on a number of community-owned properties. The easements on these properties require a management plan that guides how multiple uses of the property will be balanced. We interviewed people in several towns who were involved in the creation of their community forest plan. The following case study focuses on the Canaan Town Forest.

History and background

What is now the Canaan Community Forest had been privately owned since Canaan was first settled in the late 1700s. Some foundations remain from farms operating in the 1800s and early 1900s. There is also evidence of Native American habitation.

For generations, the public used the property for hunting, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and other recreation.

Most recently the property was owned by Neil and Louise Tillotson, owners of the Tillotson Corporation and the Balsams Grand Resort. When the Neil Tillotson Trust offered the land to the town, people were excited by the chance to guarantee public access for the future.

VLT and several partners worked with the community prior to the land transfer to design a conservation plan that met town needs. Partners included Julie Renaud Evans of the Northern

Property Snapshot

Size: 424 acres, 364 of which are conserved with the Vermont Land Trust.

Uses: Walking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and hunting. Snowmobiling and ATV riding are allowed on designated trails.

Description: The property's northern boundary is the line between the U.S. and Canada. The property has headwaters for both perennial and seasonal streams that drain directly into the Connecticut River. The forest has a mix of hardwood and softwood species, including sections of rich northern hardwood forest and spruce-fir forest. Sections of mature maple trees could support a commercial maple sugaring operation. There is one rare and four uncommon plant species—Hayden's Sedge, Drooping Bluegrass, Wild Millet-grass, Goldie's Fern, and Braun's Holly-fern. The property provides habitat for diverse wildlife and there is some evidence of deer wintering areas.

Special protections: All land within 50 feet of perennial streams have additional restrictions that ensure the aquatic habitat and water quality is protected. Activities in these areas must be in the management plan and approved by VLT staff, who will ensure consistency with the conservation easement.

Forest Center, Matt Langlais, Essex and Caledonia County Forester, and Mike Welch of the Northern Community Investment Corporation.

In 2012 the property was conveyed to the town and conserved with VLT.



Management planning process

In 2010 the town formed a Community Forest Committee to plan for the ownership and management of the forest. The committee, still in existence today, has representatives from the select board, planning board, the school district, and other residents. Initially they met every month. The following assessments were completed in 2011, before the land was conveyed to the town:

Audubon Forest Bird Habitat Assessment

A conservation biologist with Audubon Vermont looked at the habitat available for breeding birds of conservation concern and made recommendations for how to protect and/or enhance habitat for these species. Audubon does not charge landowners for this type of assessment.

Ecological Assessment

Ecologist Brett Engstrom was hired to identify natural communities (groups of plants and animals and their physical environment) and any rare or uncommon species.

Forest Stewardship Plan

The Essex County Forester conducted a timber inventory and developed recommendations for managing the timber resource over a 10-year period. County foresters provide this service to municipalities for free.

Archaeological Resource Assessment

A consultant was hired to do an inspection of areas that may have had a history of pre-colonial Native American settlement.

The committee distributed surveys at town meetings and the library. The surveys were extremely valuable for making sure that all opinions were heard. Public meetings were held about once a month. These meetings were advertised through postings in the town office. In the meantime, the school got students on the land with activities such as tapping sugar maples and making maple syrup.

Educational opportunities seemed more effective than official town meetings for getting people involved. Despite the outreach, Chris Masson, superintendent of Canaan's School District and Chair of the Forest Stewardship Committee, noted that, "there was still a limited number of people interested in this process."

The Community Forest Committee gathered all the feedback it could and used it to help determine what types of activities would be allowed under the conservation easement. These activities were then described in greater detail within the management plan.

Most of the management plan was put together by the county forester, Matt Langlais, but there were several partners, including Julie Renaud Evans of the Northern Forest Center and Tracy Zschau and Dan Kilborn of VLT, who also made significant contributions to the plan.

Chris Masson noted that the Canaan Town Forest is "one of the only [conserved] town

CANADA
UNITED STATES

Wetland

Stream Buffer

Connecticut River

RESERVOIR RD

POWER HOUSE RD

283

102

114

Scale: 1:12,500

Canaan Town Forest

Streams



0 55 110 220 330 440 Meters

0 250 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 Feet



forests that allows for ATVs because it was really important to people involved in the project. We want ATV users to come in and buy gas and support the local economy.” While not yet built at the time of this publication, a designated ATV trail will be available as long as it has no significant negative impact on the soil, water quality, and other values protected by the conservation easement.

Plan in action

Chris Masson explained that the goals for the property are education, recreation, and community development. With grant funding, a local teacher constructed a three-mile hiking trail with kiosks, maps, and bridges.

The town worked with the county forester and a logger to cut timber and used the revenue to improve access to the forest. That operation also helped develop a sugarbush.

Because the town forest is viewed as an outdoor classroom, it was a strong catalyst for the development of the diversified agriculture and natural resource program at the school. Students are on the property almost daily. Students in the building-trades built a sugarhouse, and classmates in the diversified agriculture program run the sugaring operation.

“We are tapping close to 500 maples and making 80 gallons or so a year,” said Chris. “We are renovating the old Tillotson camp and getting a kitchen set up so that students can make value-added products (maple pies, maple cream, and candies) on site. We have had multiple Game of Logging courses take place on the property. The logs are then winched and scaled out by the students. Dimension lumber is cut by the students with our sawmill and used by the Canaan Schools woodworking program.”

The town is hoping to add mountain bike trails, which will also be used for snowshoeing. And hunters are making use of the land.

Lessons Learned

“Having patience was the most successful thing that I learned from this process,” said Chris. “These projects take a significant amount of time, particularly time spent in meetings and negotiations. While gathering community feedback can really slow down the process, you come out with a much better product in the end.”

While the project didn’t face any serious challenges, the most significant one was getting the community to accept that the gift of this land was contingent upon it being conserved, because a conservation easement involves restrictions on what is allowed. The use of ATVs posed another challenge as recreational ATV use is not usually allowed on conserved land. VLT worked with the community and donors to find a way to allow ATV users access without impacting soil, water quality, other natural resources and other recreational users. ☪



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