



## Community Forest Case Study:

# Scrag Mountain Town Forest

Waitsfield, Vermont

The Vermont Land Trust (VLT) holds the conservation easement on a number of community-owned properties for which a management plan is required by the easement. This plan is a guide for how multiple uses of the property will be balanced. We interviewed people in six towns who were involved in the creation of their town forest plan. The following case study focuses on the Scrag Mountain Town Forest.

## History and background

The town forest was first created in 1992, when several landowners conveyed a conservation easement on 360 acres of mountainside to VLT, then gifted the forest to the Town of Waitsfield. The steep, rocky land was likely used for family woodlots and/or commercial timberland before becoming a town forest.

Other parcels were later added. In 2009, 220 acres were given to the town. And, in 2017 the town acquired 110 acres with the assistance of VLT, which helped with grants and a community fundraising campaign. All told, 690 acres are protected by conservation easements.

VLT staff works with the town to ensure the purposes of the conservation easement are upheld and share resources to help the town meet its land management goals.

## Property Snapshot

**Size:** 750 acres, 690 of which are conserved with the Vermont Land Trust.

**Uses:** Hiking, dog walking, and snowshoing are common. Despite a prohibition against motor vehicles, some ATV use has been observed. The property is used by hunters as well.

**Description:** With more than a mile of scenic ridgeline along the Northfield Range, the Scrag Mountain Town Forest is visible from many locations in the Mad River Valley. Steep slopes with high-elevation montane spruce-fir forests descend from either side of the ridge, while mixed and hardwood forests are at lower elevations. Water features include a six-acre, high-elevation beaver wetland, one documented vernal pool, and the steep drainages of Folsom and Felchner Brooks. These areas provide habitat for moose, deer, bear, birds of conservation concern, and many other species.

**Special protections:** A 125-acre area around and above the beaver pond and wetlands is covered by special restrictions in the conservation easement that protect the quality of wildlife habitat. Only activities that maintain and improve natural habitat features are allowed. These activities must be included in the management plan, which is reviewed by VLT staff.

With the addition of a 60-acre parcel that is not conserved, the town forest now totals 750 acres.

The forest did not have a comprehensive management plan until 2012; this was in part because of the way in which the forest was acquired parcel-by-parcel over the decades. The Waitsfield selectboard appointed the Conservation Commission to oversee the forest's management. The commission hired ecologist Kristen Sharpless with funding from private donors to assist the commission in getting public input and developing a management plan.

Phil Huffman, Conservation Commission Chair, says the commission saw the management planning process as: "an opportunity to educate people about the fantastic resources of the Scrag Forest and engage them in thinking about its future as a community asset."

## Management planning process

Prior to Kristen's involvement, the commission had the following three assessments completed:

### **Audubon Forest Bird Habitat Assessment:**

Audubon Vermont looked at the habitat for breeding birds of conservation concern and made recommendations for how to protect and/or improve this habitat. Audubon does not charge landowners for this type of assessment.

**Natural Features Inventory:** In 2008, Arrowwood Environmental identified natural communities (groups of plants and animals and their physical environment) and made note of which were significant at the state and local level. They also made management recommendations for some wildlife species. Funding for this came from private donors.

**Forest Stewardship Plan:** Initially drafted in 2009 by the Washington County Forester, and finalized in 2012, the plan identifies the overall goals for forest management along with stand-

by-stand objectives. It describes stand conditions and suggests management activities over a 10-year period. County foresters provide this service to municipalities for free.

Using this information, the commission, with Kristen's help, drafted a vision, management goals, and policies, which they presented to the public for feedback in March 2012. Forty residents attended the public meeting. After a lot more work during the following months, the commission held a second public meeting to review a draft of the final management plan; this meeting was attended by 21 residents.

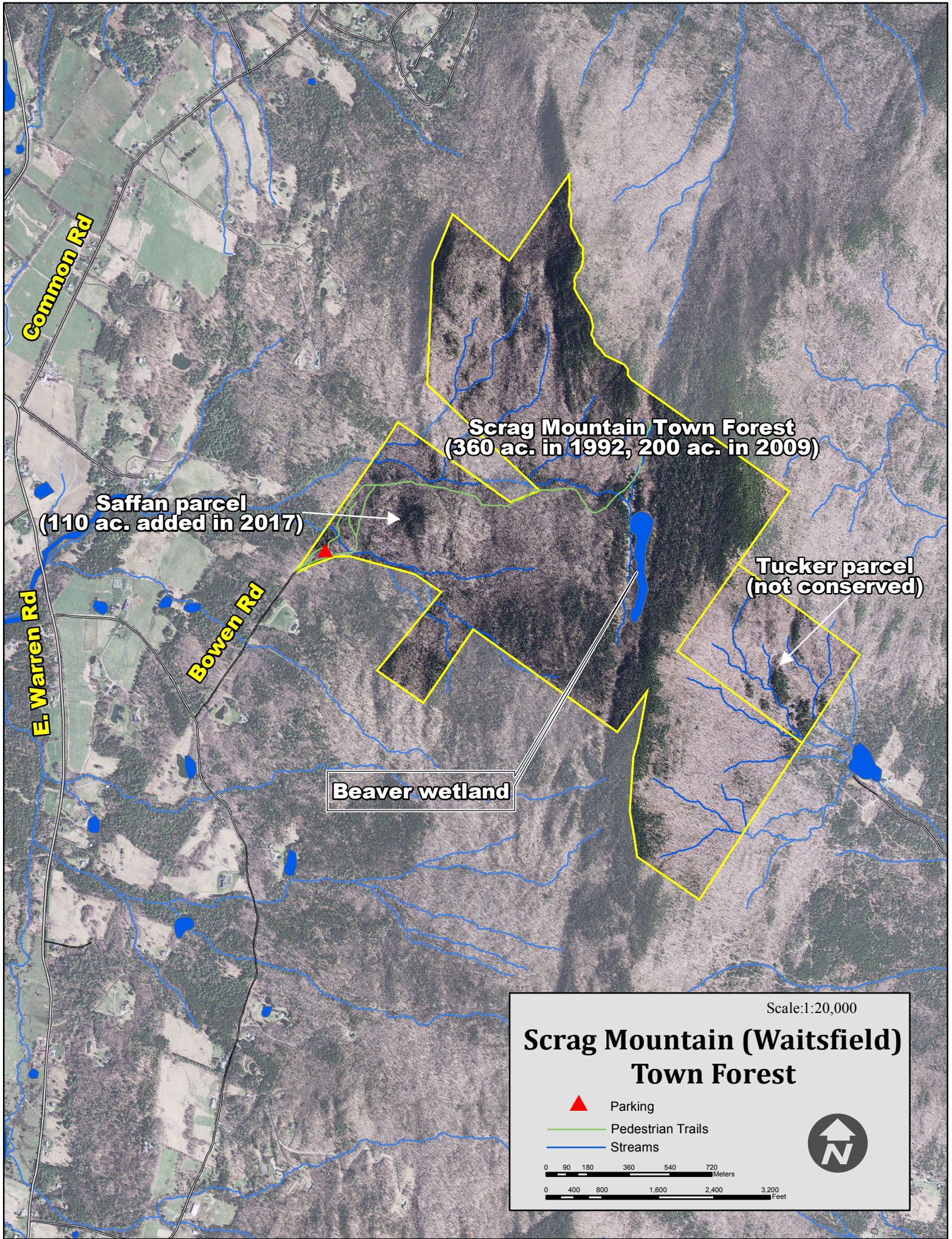
The meetings were publicized through word-of-mouth, flyers, the town website, and an invitation sent to those on the Conservation Commission email list.

"There was not a lot of controversy in the course of the public dialogue," Huffman recalled. "Some concerns were raised about the potential impacts of, and conflicts between, different recreational users (e.g., mountain bikers and horseback riders), unleashed dogs and their effect on other users and wildlife, parking, and trail access and development. Residents were supportive of timber harvesting as long as it aligned with other goals.

The community feedback was incorporated into the management goals and objectives and summarized in an appendix to the management plan. The final plan was posted online and a copy was placed at the town office.

## Plan in action

While the management plan was in development, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps was hired to build a footpath to access the town forest. The work was funded by the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, the Vermont Agency of Transportation, and Entrust (a private foundation).



**Saffan parcel  
(110 ac. added in 2017)**

**Scrag Mountain Town Forest  
(360 ac. in 1992, 200 ac. in 2009)**

**Tucker parcel  
(not conserved)**

**Beaver wetland**

**Common Rd**

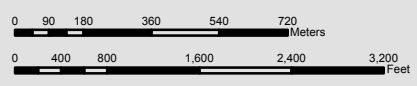
**E. Warren Rd**

**Bowen Rd**

Scale: 1:20,000

# Scrag Mountain (Waitsfield) Town Forest

- ▲ Parking
- Pedestrian Trails
- Streams



After the plan was finalized, the Conservation Commission hired a trail consultant and the town administered a timber sale. The town also signed a lease on 125 acres with a sugarmaker. The commission considered the impacts of the lease, solicited input from the public, and then amended the management plan. In 2017 when the town acquired an additional 110 acres with a new parking area and improved forest access, the commission began updating the management plan to include this parcel.

## Lessons Learned

Kristen and Phil said the dedication of the Conservation Commission volunteers was critical to making the planning process successful. They also attributed the success to:

***Having a diverse group of people oversee the management planning.*** “Having a mix of perspectives and expertise on the conservation commission [and having members who are] seen as credible and respected was really important,” noted Phil.

***Dedicating funds for the assessments, plan development, and follow-up.*** The Conservation Commission used funding from private sources for the natural features inventory and to hire Kristen. Further, “They now have substantial timber and sugaring revenues that can be recycled back into future improvements to the property,” added Kristen.

***Doing the inventory and assessments up front.*** Kristen said that part of what made working on the plan easy is that the town had a lot of information. She didn’t believe the plan would have been as successful if the town had not had these resources.

***Hiring a consultant to provide capacity and expertise.*** “[Kristen] has good natural resource knowledge, and is very good technically and with GIS,” explained Phil. “She is extremely helpful with the public involvement process.”

Furthermore, a consultant can facilitate the discussion and provide an outside perspective. Kristen did a lot of work with the Conservation Commission to work through issues before it went to the public. It can be helpful to have someone who is not a part of the group navigate that process. Kristen said that “although volunteer work is incredible, having a paid staff person committed to the project ensures that conservation goals are met in an effective manner.” That said, you don’t need a consultant to create a plan. Kristen wrote a plan as a volunteer on the Hinesburg Town Forest Committee. Other commissions have similarly skilled volunteers.

***Don’t feel like you have to plan every detail upfront.*** The emphasis at the beginning was on creating a vision, and a description of the natural, cultural, and recreational resources and uses, and then lining up some general action items. For the Scrag Mountain Town Forest, there were sub-plans that supplemented the guiding document.

***Making time for public involvement that is transparent and welcoming.*** Because residents were included, and in some cases recruited, they were able to express their wishes, which helped the project gain broader support.

Finally, Phil noted that one of the most important aspects of creating a management plan is to stay patient and find ways to have fun with the project, as these projects tend to take a long time: “Keep your eye on the prize and don’t get burned out or dispirited if things take a while!”

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