

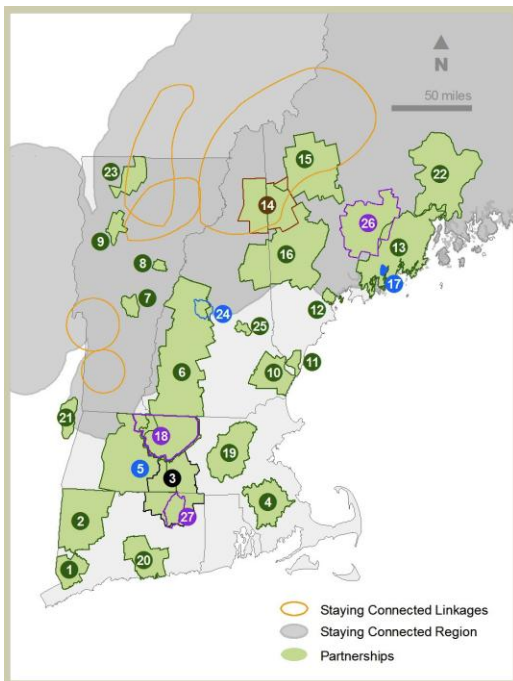
Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs): The New Face of Conservation in New England

The Wildlands and Woodlands Initiative ~ June 2012

I. An Introduction to Regional Conservation Partnerships (RCPs)

Across New England, conservation groups and communities are banding together to achieve conservation at a larger scale. These collaboratives, called “regional conservation partnerships” (RCPs),¹ vary in size and scope, but are generally informal networks of people representing private and public organizations and agencies that implement shared long-term conservation visions that cross town and sometimes state boundaries. The 30-plus RCPs in New England play an increasingly important role in achieving landscape-scale conservation that is also firmly woven into the needs and interests of the local communities.

The 2010 [Wildlands and Woodlands](#) (W&W) Vision documented that the resurgence of New England’s forests has peaked, and that every state in the region is now experiencing net annual forest loss. And yet forests are central to the identity of the region and its local communities. Forests clean the air, filter water, shelter wildlife, combat climate change, and provide firewood, maple syrup, recreation and rejuvenation as well as vital employment in multiple sectors.



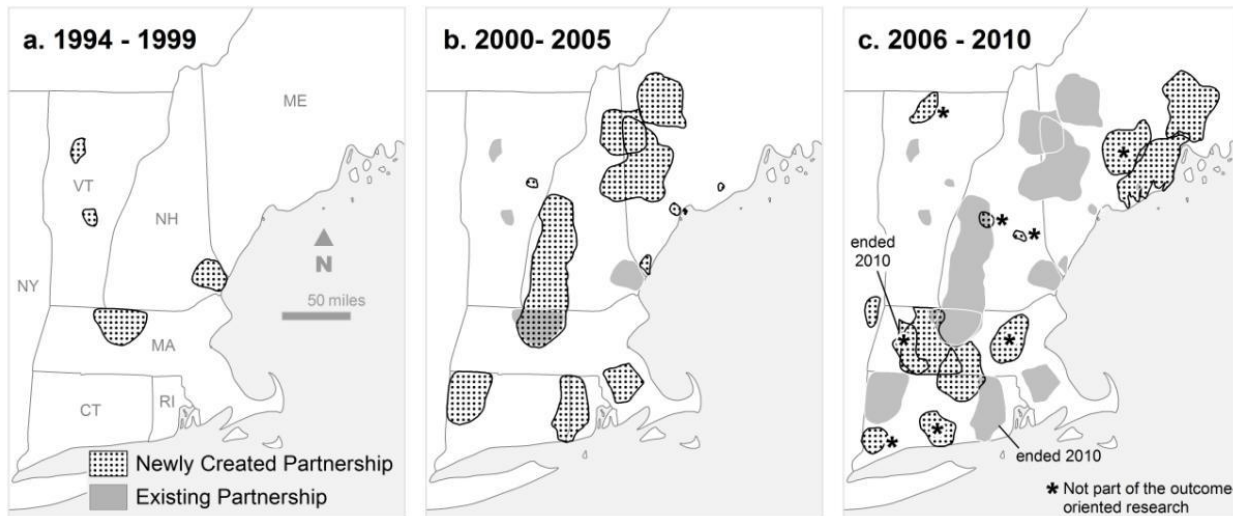
Much of the forest loss occurring today is from development and fragmentation within the landscape of small ownerships that characterize the region. New England is comprised of more than 80 percent private lands, and a 2006 survey of New England forestland owners revealed that 43,000 landowners owning 1.75 million acres planned to sell some or all of their land in the next five years, and that 28,000 owners owning 500,000 acres planned to subdivide their land over the same period.

In order to achieve the Wildlands and Woodlands Vision across New England, it is no longer enough to conserve individual, even large, forestland acreages. Today, conservation must occur at multiple scales, as community leaders work to put conservation easements on local woodlands and save traditional trails or fishing holes, while simultaneously working with public and private partners to protect the larger habitat corridor or rivershed through a combination of public funds, tax incentives, and private monies. Habitat connectivity at the landscape scale is particularly important in a time of global climate change. The RCPs, composed of partners from the town to federal agency levels, have emerged as an effective response

to this compelling need for multi-scale collaboration and conservation.

¹ RCPs were called “woodland councils” in the 2010 W&W report, and some groups use that term when describing ongoing collaborative conservation at the sub-regional scale.

Since 1994, RCPs have been advancing land conservation in places like Maine's Mahoosuc Mountains, New Hampshire's Great Bay, the Maine Coast, the Taunton River Watershed, the Green Mountains, and the North Quabbin region of Massachusetts. The number of RCPs has grown rapidly, and the number of organizations involved in these informal collaborations has risen from about 50 to more than 350. With the emergence of five new RCPs within the past two years, the area covered by RCPs totaled 18 million acres – or more than 55% of the forestland in the region.



At least ten of the thirty RCPs have protected land as a partnership at a pace they deeply believe to be greater than what they could have accomplished working alone. The remaining RCPs are building efforts and are at different stages of maturity, moving toward the goal of long-term land protection.²

RCPs reflect the complexity of today's conservation landscape in New England. These collaborative partnerships are firmly tethered to the grass roots of the local community, and tailor their conservation planning to the deep knowledge of the people who live on that landscape and need to have a meaningful say in how this land will be conserved for future generations. But RCPs also work to achieve conservation at the larger landscape scale and harness the knowledge, resources, and commitment of larger conservation organizations and state and federal agencies pivotal to conserving the broader landscape.

Bonded by a shared commitment, RCPs build expansive networks, knit together partner agendas and activities, build trust, craft shared conservation visions, and raise the money to get the job done. This is not a top-down approach; it is the new generation of locally-fueled Yankee ingenuity. RCPs represent the innovative, collaborative conservation at multiple scales of land and community that it will take to conserve the farmed and forested landscapes of New England.

"It is increasingly imperative to address (land and water conservation) at the scale of large landscapes.... there is a gap in governance and a corresponding need to create informal and formal ways to work more effectively across boundaries."

*"Large Landscape Conservation: A Strategic Framework for Policy and Action."
Matthew McKinney, Lynn Scarlett, and Daniel Kemmis; Published by Lincoln Institute.
2010.*

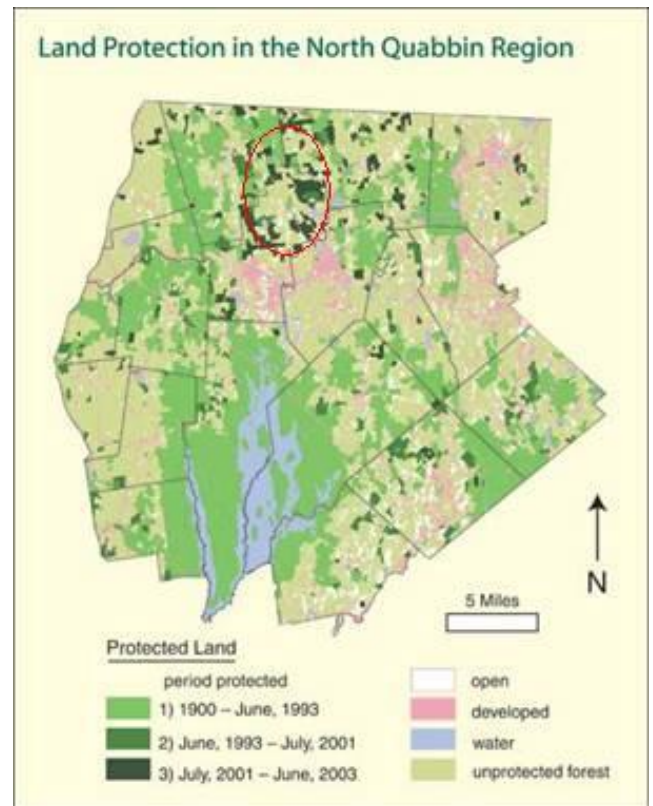
² The RCP analysis in this document comes primarily from research of 20 New England RCPs conducted by Highstead Regional Conservationist Bill Labich from 2009-2010 with colleagues from UMass and the Harvard Forest. The research paper, "Regional Conservation Partnerships in New England," was submitted to the Journal of Forestry in December 2011.

II. Examples of RCPs

One example of an RCP that has successfully accelerated the pace and scale of land conservation is the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership (NQRLP). The NQRLP covers approximately half a million acres in 26 towns in north central Massachusetts. Established in 1998 by Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the Harvard Forest, the group soon brought together over twenty people representing regional and local land trusts, municipal commissions, a regional planning agency, and several state and federal agencies including the National Park Service (NPS).

Encouraged by the NPS, the partnership created the 22-mile Tully Trail (approximate location in red on the map). Soon thereafter (2001-2003), the Commonwealth of Massachusetts assisted family forest owners in the region who were interested in placing conservation restrictions on their lands. Overall, eight million dollars were spent to protect 9,000 acres on 104 parcels in two years. As a result, much of the Tully Trail is located on private lands permanently free of development and the region experienced a significant increase in the pace of conservation. Since then, the NQRLP has cultivated

"official" liaisons in each community, assisted towns and other land trusts with their conservation objectives (using a small grant program), and developed some of the most successful multiple-parcel Forest Legacy applications in the nation. One small grant to a partner land trust several years ago led to the largest conservation easement in MA history (Paul C. Jones Working Forest) in 2012.



The North Quabbin Partnership is also the southern anchor of the larger Quabbin to Cardigan Initiative (Q2C). Launched in 2003, Q2C is a collaborative, landscape-scale effort of 27 private organizations and public agencies to conserve the two million-acre Monadnock Highlands of north-central Massachusetts and

western New Hampshire. The Q2C partners share a vision of consolidating the permanent protection of the region's most ecologically significant forest blocks and key connections between them for wildlife passage and human recreation. The Q2C partners worked for three years to craft a strategic conservation plan, and now meet quarterly to coordinate public and private finance efforts, communications, conservation planning, and real estate transaction work—including reviewing projects seeking partnership endorsement.



Successful conservation by the Q2C Initiative will protect one of the largest remaining areas of intact, interconnected, ecologically significant forest in central New England and a key headwater of the Merrimack and Connecticut rivers. The Q2C region's forests collect and naturally filter drinking water for almost 200 cities and towns including the City of Boston. Habitat conservation in the region is also a high priority for both the Massachusetts and New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plans. The region's interconnected forests will prove an important north-south

corridor for wildlife adapting their ranges to a changing climate, and will connect to other RCP conservation

areas to create a vital habitat corridor stretching from the Atlantic Ocean north to Canada. The breathtaking conservation opportunities available to Q2C and other RCPs today will not last forever in a highly populated region with escalating development pressures.

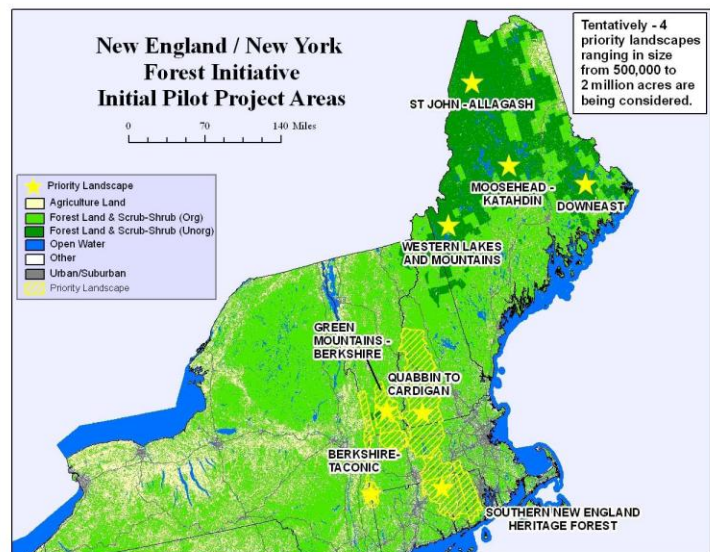
III. W&W and the RCP Network

Highstead has convened regular RCP meetings since 2008 for peer exchange and technical training in order to help build robust RCPs and develop innovative strategies to increase the pace of conservation in accordance with the W&W vision. Highstead also works individually with specific RCPs to help them build capacity and to share its region-wide analysis regarding what structural components and strategies will help create a more effective RCP initiative.



These conservation practitioner meetings have now evolved into a more structured [RCP Network](#) that institutionalizes the value of regular peer exchange and technical training and provides an important community of learning for the rapidly evolving field of landscape-scale collaborative conservation. The RCP Network holds a yearly meeting with in-depth workshops, supplemented by a webinar series, a [Linked-in Group](#), and access to an extensive collection of [resources](#) on the [RCP Network](#) section of the [W&W website](#).

An additional purpose of the RCP Network is to build the identity and “brand” of RCPs so that more people understand and support the new face of conservation in New England. For example, the RCP Network Gathering in 2010 led to the development of a US Forest Service-funded, landowner engagement project in four inter-state landscapes prioritized by the New England Governors Conference: Quabbin to Cardigan (NH and MA); the Southern New England Heritage Forest (RI, CT, and MA); the Green Mountain and Berkshire Hills (VT and MA); and the Taconics (CT, NY, VT and MA). As a result, four RCPs are increasing their conservation efforts and have access to \$73,000 to support that important work.



Increased funding is essential to support both RCP capacity and on-the-ground protection efforts if we are to optimize the conservation opportunities available in New England today.

From 2009-2010, Highstead researched RCPs in New England and analyzed what elements correlated with conservation success. All RCPs are different, but Highstead research suggests some typical steps that RCPs take on their path to conservation that can be simplified into three stages of growth: Emerging, Maturing, and Conserving. Within each of these categories, RCPs undertake a range of activities from community bird walks to major capital campaigns, depending on their level of organizational development:

Emerging

1. Convene: Host partner(s) convene people to address an opportunity or threat.
2. Core Values and Vision: Partners build trust and leadership; agree on governance structures (e.g. steering committees and working groups), mission, goals, and tools (e.g. websites and plans).

Maturing

3. Capacity: Building an RCP takes staffing capacity, and RCPs who can afford it move forward far more quickly toward broad-based conservation success. Highstead research in 2009 revealed that the RCPs that reached the land conservation stage before they turned six had host partners with more than one full-time equivalent staff position. Those that lacked these resources experienced an extended timeline for each key stage of progress.
4. Catalyze: Move forward on key steps, including conservation mapping, conservation strategy and plan, expanded community/landowner outreach and activities, and messaging and communications.
5. Coordinate: Start to plan and execute individual projects cooperatively. Increase fundraising efforts.

Conserving

6. Capital Campaign: Develop and implement a collaborative capital campaign strategy, whether it is federal, state, private or a combination of funding sources.
7. Conservation Implementation: Successful RCPs reach the stage of multi-year, collaborative land conservation, generally employing a mix of donated and purchased fee and easement lands that together achieve the group's conservation vision. This larger, collaborative vision attracts new and more sustained funding and achieves the accelerated pace of conservation called for in the W&W vision and necessary to reverse development trends in the region. Access to acquisition and associated due diligence funding is critical for this stage.

Increased funding focused on the capacity bottleneck will help Emerging and Maturing RCPs move more quickly and reliably into on-the-ground conservation, and increased funding for due diligence steps and acquisition is critical for Conserving RCPs to achieve success. The W&W Initiative welcomes partners who would like to help build an RCP-capacity grants program or provide acquisition monies for RCP initiatives. Supporting the vital work of our thirty-plus RCPs will help double the pace of conservation while empowering individuals, organizations, and communities to work together across the region to conserve the New England landscape that sustains us all.

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