

Workshop on Improving Land Use Planning Tools to Enhance Wildlife Conservation on Private Lands

Science Delivery grantee Wildlife Conservation Society brought together practitioners in the field of land-use planning in the Northeast for a two-day workshop in 2015, focused on improving municipal land-use planning tools to better support wildlife conservation on private land.

By helping bridge the gap between regional conservation needs and local planning realities, the workshop attendees are contributing to the development of a set of resources that will help communities and landowners invest in actions that offer the greatest long-term benefits for wildlife. Products in progress:

- Report on wildlife friendly land-use planning tools (in conjunction with workshop participants)
- Database of communities with regulatory framework in place to support meaningful conservation actions
- Custom online portal for New York state where communities can view conservation datasets and other relevant resources

Behind the scenes with workshop attendees:

Karen Strong, *Biodiversity Program Coordinator, Hudson River Estuary Program, Cornell University*

Michael Klemens, *Herpetologist, former Senior Conservationist for the Wildlife Conservation Society and Director of the Metropolitan Conservation Alliance*

Kate McCarthy, *Sustainable Communities Program Director, Vermont Natural Resource Council*

WHY DOES CONSERVATION ON PRIVATE LAND MATTER?

STRONG: This is where the rubber meets the road in conservation. If you don't talk about local land use planning, you're missing so much of what's happening on the ground, both in terms of impacts for biodiversity, and opportunities to educate people about the impacts they are having.

KLEMENS: There is no way we can sustain wildlife and habitats

solely through traditional conservation mechanisms, like land purchases, particularly in this time of habitat realignment from climate change. The only way we can ensure intact, vibrant, functioning ecosystems is to address private lands that are interspersed between protected areas.

MCCARTHY: The reality is that most land-use decisions are regulated at the local level, and made at the parcel level. That means when it comes to regionally important resources, you have the potential for a patchwork. So we have to start at the grassroots level to help landowners make good decisions, and to help towns lead good decisions, in a healthy landscape context.

HOW DOES THIS PROJECT HELP ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE?

STRONG: It's a matter of understanding what is really important for people to know. If we expect citizen planners to understand biodiversity before they

can make a decision that supports biodiversity, we're never going to get anything done. We need to find a common language - not just with words, but with values - that will allow communities to integrate biodiversity into land use planning in terms that are meaningful to them.

KLEMENS: Often there are missed opportunities in communities because of a lack of awareness, or a lack of having appropriate regulations in place. It's not enough to have a tool, you have to have enabling legislation, ordinances that point people in the right direction to use the tools. We need to have the implementation to make them work, and then we need to be able to explain to local officials why these tools are good, and how they can benefit communities.

MCCARTHY: Every day local officials, whether paid or volunteer, are being asked to address a whole range of



Experts in land-use planning from across the region gathered for a two-day workshop led by the Wildlife Conservation Society in Fairlee, V.T. Credit: Bridget Macdonald/NALCC

issues. Wildlife, habitat, forest connectivity, and working lands, are just a small slice of what they are dealing with, so we need to make it as easy as possible for local officials to take steps that are going to help sustain those resources. If we can come up with good models that are relatively easy to adopt and to implement, we are going to have much greater success.

WHAT DID YOU TAKE AWAY FROM PARTICIPATING IN THIS WORKSHOP?

STRONG: To be able to connect with others who not only understand the importance of biodiversity for conservation, but also understand what is and is not possible at the local level, is exciting and invigorating. We are all working towards the same goal of improving biodiversity conservation at the local level, and working with others only makes your work better. Who doesn't want that?

KLEMENS: I've learned a lot about different types of conservation planning challenges that my colleagues are dealing with. I think the relationships that are being developed here will transcend this meeting and become working relationships.

MCCARTHY: It's helpful to talk to people outside my own state because they are working on this issue in contexts that are different enough to teach me something new, but similar enough for me to come away with ideas that I can actually replicate in Vermont.

LEARN MORE:

- **Wildlife Conservation Society, Adirondacks Program:** <http://www.wcsnorthamerica.org/Wild-Places/Adirondacks.aspx>
- **Hudson River Estuary Conservation and Land Use Program:** <http://hudson.dnr.cals.cornell.edu/extension>
- **Vermont Natural Resources Council:** <http://vnrc.org>
- **Michael Klemens:** <http://www.michaelwklemens.com>