

Land Conservation in the Mad River Valley: A Threatened Landscape

The unique beauty and character of the Mad River Valley is celebrated by residents and visitors to the Valley. From the forested ridgelines of the Green Mountains and the Northfield Mountains to the stretches of farmland along the Mad River, the diverse features of the Mad River watershed contribute to the character of the landscape and the vitality of the Valley community.

The Mad River Valley community's interest in protecting the natural beauty of the Valley can be traced back to the 1950's. Many changes were occurring in the Valley, from the declining number of active farms, to the expansion of the ski industry and second home development. In 1957, according to Richard Bisbee's History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont, Waitsfield established a committee to "investigate establishing a municipal forest," an event that did not actually transpire until nearly forty years later, when the town acquired 360 acres on Scrag Mountain in 1992.

By the early 1980's, this consideration for landscape turned to concern. Community leaders and local citizens recognized that the shifting economy and the subdivision and development of former farms and large tracts of forestland would forever alter the landscape, unless an effort was made to plan comprehensively- and collaboratively- for conservation and development in the Valley.

A Unique Public-Private Partnership

The establishment of the Mad River Valley Planning District in 1985, a unique three-town planning body, sparked a number of efforts to identify the agricultural, scenic, natural and recreational assets of the Valley. Working with the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation, the Planning District produced the Mad River Valley Rural Resource Protection Plan in 1988 to identify outstanding resources and outline protection measures.

*In the following two decades, a unique partnership formed between the Vermont Land Trust and the Mad River Valley Planning District and, after its formation in 1990, the Friends of the Mad River. In 2001, this cooperative relationship was formalized as the **Mad River Conservation Partnership**, which developed the following mission: The mission of the Conservation Partnership is to identify critical resources and assist willing landowners, organizations and communities in protecting and strengthening the watershed's working landscape, ecological health, rural character, recreational opportunity and community vitality.*

The three partner organizations, often working in conjunction with watershed towns, local organizations such as the Mad River Path Association, and state and national land conservation organizations such as the Trust for Public Land, have permanently conserved more than 9,588 acres of farm and forestland.

When combined with land conserved directly by municipalities, other conservation organizations such as the Green Mountain Club, and more than 19,000 acres of State and Federal land in the five watershed towns, these efforts represent a growing conservation legacy that will contribute to the Mad River valley's scenic, ecological, cultural and economic well-being for generations to come.

(Link to conserved lands map PDF)

Table 1: Conserved Lands in Mad River Watershed Towns: Fayston, Waitsfield, Warren, Moretown, and Duxbury.

(Note: The actual watershed includes only portion of Moretown and Duxbury and consists of approximately 92,000 acre)

	<i>Total Acres</i>	<i>State/Federal land</i>	<i>Municipal Conserved land</i>	<i>Privately-owned Conserved land</i>	<i>Total Conserved/State/Federal</i>	<i>% Conserved/State/Federal land</i>
<i>Fayston</i>	23,360	2,998	73	1,531	4,602	20%
<i>Waitsfield</i>	17,220	550	696	1,212	2,458	14%
<i>Warren</i>	25,368	6,995	0	1,253	8,248	33%
<i>Moretown</i>	26,432	0	116	1,646	1,762	6%
<i>Duxbury</i>	27,376	8,935	0	577	9,512	35%
<i>Total (in MR Watershed)</i>	119,756	19,478	885	6,219	26,582	22%

Conservation Easements: A Tool for Land Protection

The 1988 Mad River Valley Rural Resource Protection Plan called for public education about "voluntary conservation options" to encourage owners of "key rural land resources" to conserve their land. While regulatory measures, zoning and the state's Current Use Program have influenced land use in the Valley, the success of land protection is overwhelming due to the individuals and families who responded to the opportunity to permanently preserve their property.

Landowners--private individuals, municipalities and state agencies--participate in voluntary conservation efforts with the use of a legal tool called a conservation easement, a deed which permanently restricts or carefully limits the future development or subdivision of land. The goal of a conservation easement is to protect the natural and productive values of a property, allowing for continued use of land for farming or forestry and the long-term preservation of ecological biodiversity.

Conservation easements can be donated or sold to a qualified conservation organization, such as a land trust, or to a municipality. Landowners who choose to donate a conservation easement are often eligible for income tax deductions. Other owners of qualifying properties, such as high quality farmland, are often eligible for conservation funding in exchange for the conveyance of a conservation easement on their land.

Landowners who conserve their land through the sale or donation of a conservation easement continue to own and manage their land. A conservation easement "runs with the land," binding future owners to the terms of the agreement

Funding Conservation Projects

A major source of conservation funding in Vermont comes from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. The federally-funded Forest Legacy Program has also been integral to the conservation of significant tracts of forestland in Vermont and across the nation. National conservation organizations such as the Trust for Public Land, the Nature Conservancy, the Conservation Fund and numerous other private and family foundations provide leadership and support for conservation initiatives.

Landowners who chose to donate conservation easements are often eligible for federal income tax benefits, though many still make a charitable donation to help cover the legal and transactional costs associated with their land conservation project and to establish a stewardship endowment for the land.

Conservation Legacies: Family Farms and Forests

*In 2002, the Mad River Watershed Conservation Partnership published *The Mad River Valley: A Continuing Legacy*, to tell the stories of the land conservation projects completed in the Valley between 1983 and 2002, beginning with one of the Valley's first conservationists, Ann Day.*

Fayston resident Ann Day was the first landowner in the Mad River Valley to use a conservation easement to voluntarily protect her land from future development. Recognizing the special value of her 144 acre farm on Bragg Hill, Ann donated a conservation easement to the Vermont Land Trust in 1983. This generous gift ensured that the Knoll Farm's scenic open fields and forestland, a landmark in the Valley, would forever remain a part of the local scenic and productive working landscape.

Ann Day's conservation gift inspired many other families to establish their own conservation legacy in the Valley in the following decades. More than 30 landowners have followed her example, donating conservation easements to the Vermont Land Trust on more than 5,780 acres of farm and forestland.

The History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont notes the precipitous decline in operating dairy farms between 1960 and 2000. Conservation efforts undertaken in the Mad River Valley have helped to keep farmland in active, productive use, even as

agriculture has evolved and diversified in Vermont As a result of these conservation efforts carried out by landowners and their families in the Valley, more than ten operating farms and five additional properties with leased farmland will remain forever available for diverse agricultural uses, producing vegetables, berries, meat, poultry, maple syrup, flowers, medicinal crops and hay.

Public Land Conservation: Significant Forested Landscapes

Conservation of broad, undeveloped tracts of forestland is critical to the integrity of Vermont's natural heritage, productive "working landscape" and recreational uses. In the Valley, the permanent protection of significant forested resources has been achieved by the acquisition of land by municipalities, the State of Vermont and the United States Forest Service.

Examples of significant land conservation projects in the Mad River Valley which resulted in the public ownership of land include Phenn Basin, which resulted in the protection in 1995 of 3,120 acres of forestland which was slated for timber liquidation.

The majority of this property (2,695 acres) was transferred to the Vermont Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation, while a 428 acre parcel was conserved and sold to the Big Basin Trust. In 2000, 368 acres surrounding the popular recreational resource of Blueberry Lake was purchased by the Trust for Public Land, then resold to the United States Forest Service.

At the municipal level, the Towns of Fayston, Waitsfield and Moretown have each acted to conserve parcels of town-owned forestland which provide significant opportunities for public recreation and education. These lands also include important wildlife habitat and sensitive ecological features, such as wetlands, vernal pools, deer wintering area and mast stands.

Land Conservation: A Community-Supported Vision for the Future

As shown by historical records from the 1950s, the Rural Resource Protection Plan of 1988, numerous town surveys and current town plans in Mad River Valley towns, residents of the Valley have repeatedly affirmed their interest in protecting the natural, scenic and productive features that contribute to the unique beauty, health and character of the Mad River Watershed.

The links between the quality of our landscape and community vitality are clear. The healthy, diverse forests that provide habitat for wildlife also offer places to hunt and recreate. Local economies are stimulated by the production of timber, maple syrup and other forest products. Tourists, drawn by the Valley's beauty and recreational attractions, help to sustain local businesses. Family farms, once thought to be on the decline, are re-emerging as diversified agricultural operations responding to the growing demand for locally-grown and raised food.

We can all participate in the effort to protect Vermont's forests and open land. From families conserving their land as a legacy for future generations, to community leaders, residents and visitors supporting conservation efforts and fundraising initiatives, the future of our landscape hinges on the actions we take today. For more information about the Mad River Watershed Conservation Partnership, and land conservation in the Mad River Valley, please contact the Vermont Land Trust's Waitsfield office at 496-3690.