

A photograph of a dense forest with tall, thin trees and a thick canopy of green leaves. A wooden boardwalk path winds through the forest floor, which is covered in fallen leaves and some rocks. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day.

Creating a Community: Coming Together to Conserve Forestland for All

By Joe Rankin



Community forests host a multitude of different users, and uses. Here, a mountain biker wheels his way through West Windsor Town Forest in Vermont.

Sheila Bourque remembers well exactly when it all started. It was about five years ago. She had climbed Hacker's Hill in the Maine town of Casco and arrived at the top to find a celebration in progress.

Curious, she wandered over to find out what the party was about. From Carrie Walia, who was then executive director of the Loon Echo Land Trust, Bourque learned that the festivities marked the closure of a deal to protect the hill from development. The organization had another campaign coming up – to conserve a property in Raymond.

"I said, 'Well, I live in Raymond,'" remembers Bourque. She indicated she might be interested in getting involved.

The next spring, Bourque got a call and subsequently threw herself, body and soul, into a campaign to raise \$680,000 to protect 325 acres in her town. She asked potential donors for money; she spoke before groups; she talked up the project to anyone who would listen. None of which this retired IT professional and former Illinois state worker thought she could ever do, but once she started, she "found it very empowering. I can't even describe what it feels like."

Half a decade after that chance meeting on a hilltop, Bourque had her own reason to celebrate: the Raymond Community Forest was a reality.

The Common Good

The Raymond Forest is one of the newest community forests in New England, but it won't be the last. In recent years, the creation of community forests has increased as towns look for new alternatives to conserve forestland. Since 2000, 40 community forests have been created in New England, permanently conserving more than 103,000 acres. These forests range in size from 65 to 33,000 acres and are represented in every New England state but Rhode Island.

Modern community forests are based on the idea of town forests, a tradition that has its roots in colonial times, as well as the concept of "commons." Boston Common, for instance, was public grazing land back in the day. Newly organized New England towns often set aside acreage for the common good – for schools, churches, cemeteries, colleges and universities, poor farms, and public lands including forestland.

While towns in New England had owned forestland since settlement times, it was in the late 1800s and early 1900s that the concept of town forests really took off. Interest in scientific forestry in the U.S. was blooming at this time, and advocates promoted legislation to encourage towns to establish town-owned forests and ensure that state resources, including the help of state foresters, were available to help them manage those assets.

Over the next century, the ethic behind management of town forests changed from an emphasis on utility to a more mixed-use and recreation-heavy mandate, but the movement continues to grow. Today, for instance, some 170 municipalities in Maine own about 150,000 acres of town forest. These include the biggest cities – Portland, Bangor, and Lewiston – and smaller towns like Bath and China. In Vermont, one inventory estimates that town forests cover 120,000 acres. The terms "community forest" and

"town forest" are often used interchangeably, but there are subtle and crucial differences.

Key to the definition of a community forest is protection, said Jennifer Melville of the Open Space Institute, a national conservation organization that works with towns and community organizations interested in creating community forests. Towns may own "town forest" lands, perhaps acquired for back taxes, but if there's nothing to prevent the towns' selectboards from selling them or offering them for development, they're not really community forests. When a town forest gets official status and protection, perhaps through a vote at a town meeting or a conservation easement, that's when it truly becomes a community forest, she said.

Of course, not all community forests are town owned. The Community Forest Collaborative, a partnership of the Trust for Public Land and the Open Space Institute, describes community forests as "tracts of forestland that are owned by local governments, tribal councils or other entities (community-based not-for-profits) on behalf of communities. They are created and managed through participatory and collaborative processes, provide multiple benefits and value to the communities, and permanently protect the conservation values of the land."

In the hierarchy of conservation ownerships – national forests, national parks, state parks and preserves, and so on – community forests are about as local as it gets. Local public values drive the management of these properties and vary from project to project – wildlife habitat, conservation, recreation, watershed protection, and sustainable forestry are just a few. Many community forests promote several of these uses.

While New England can be said to be a leader in community forest creation in the U.S., the concept is being implemented worldwide. There are forests owned and managed by local people from Ecuador to Nepal, Canada to Niger, England to South Korea. The World Resources Institute (WRI) estimates that there are almost 1.3 billion acres of community forests worldwide, though in many developing countries, rural or indigenous peoples' rights and titles to the land are legally murky. WRI said that these community forests could combat climate change and reduce poverty.

"Definitely, there is renewed interest in the concept, not only in New England, but elsewhere," said Melville.

Rodger Krussman of the Trust for Public Land agrees. He calls community forests a "growing movement." Krussman has spent 15 years working on land conservation across northern New England and said, "We spend a lot more time on this now than we used to, and other organizations are doing so as well."

A Wealth of Benefits

Laura Stillson marvels at the West Windsor Town Forest in Vermont. Particularly that, at 1,580 acres, it makes up nearly a tenth of the town. "That's a pretty interesting figure," said Stillson, who enjoys what the forest has to offer and has worked to expand it and plan for its future.

A donation of 1,112 acres in the 1970s created the town forest, but the land was pretty much ignored until an interest

in creating a network of mountain biking trails there surfaced a few years ago, Stillson said. And after the Ascutney Mountain Resort went bankrupt, local residents started thinking big: what about buying that 468 acres and adding it to the adjacent town forest? In 2015, they made it so, raising \$915,000, with the town donating \$105,000.

The West Windsor Town Forest, once a half-forgotten piece of the town, is now a hub of the community that draws people to the area from other nearby communities and even from out of state, said Stillson. "Sometimes on weekends, it's hard to find a parking spot in the west parking lot," she said, estimating that close to a third of the town's population uses the town forest's trail network to hike, walk their dogs, mountain bike, or ski or snowshoe in the winter. The local school uses it for outdoor classes and bike and ski races, and even a music festival. "It's almost like a town common. Everyone is vested in this now. It's part of everyone's existence," she said. Her favorite part of the forest is the trail to Ascutney's summit.

Some people argue that community forests represent a loss to

communities because the acreage isn't generating development and taxes. Supporters point out that community forests can serve as vehicles for "wealth creation" in rural communities, both financial and otherwise. The capital they create can include income from sustainable timber harvesting, the preservation of hunting and fishing opportunities for locals, an enhanced tourist economy, and the protection of water quality and wildlife habitat – all of which has value.

A report entitled *Community Forests: a Community Investment Strategy*, by the Community Forest Collaborative, looked at five community forest projects in northern New England and found that the forests "either pay their way or produce no net costs to towns."

It Takes Money

In Errol, New Hampshire, creation of the 13 Mile Woods Community Forest along the Androscoggin River cost \$4,050,000 for the initial 5,269 acres in 2005 (another 1,800 acres was added later), according to an economic report by The Trust for Public Land. But the town acquired a key piece of conservation and recreation land with standing timber worth almost \$6 million.

A group of citizen scientists birding in the Downeast Lakes Community Forest in Maine.



DOWNEAST LAKES LAND TRUST

The first seven years of ownership yielded timber revenues of \$3.7 million. Some \$2 million of that went to local logging contractors, while net revenues of \$1.7 million allowed the town to pay off 50 percent of the project's debt. Annual harvests are expected to be around 2,000 cords, which should yield \$100,000 in annual net revenue, the report said. And those returns don't even include the tourism factor, which is estimated to be worth \$2.2 million annually to the Errol area's economy

The Farm Cove and West Grand Lake Community Forests in eastern Maine were rooted in the land-ownership upheavals of the 1990s, when paper companies divested themselves of millions of acres all across the North Woods.

Residents of the rural area worried that, without protection, shoreline would be developed, the timber would be cut and the land sold, public access would be limited, and traditional ways of life like hunting and guiding in a relatively unspoiled area would be jeopardized. "We got scared and decided to do something about it. We didn't think this big at all. We were thinking on a small scale in the beginning," said Louis Cataldo, who helped form the Downeast Lakes Land Trust in 2001. He works as a local guide and serves as first selectman of the town of Grand Lake Stream, population 150.

In partnership with the New England Forestry Foundation, and with the help of some deep-pocketed donors, Downeast Lakes raised \$34.8 million to purchase 27,080 acres and placed 312,000 acres of surrounding land under conservation easements. Additional purchases by the land trust later expanded Farm Cove to 33,708 acres, and this year, the organization closed on a \$19.4-million deal to buy 21,870 acres to create the West Grand Lake Community Forest. Following that most recent purchase, the two contiguous forests have been combined to form the nearly 56,000-acre Downeast Lakes Community Forest. The property includes countless miles of lakeshore, streams, bogs, and deer-wintering areas.

"It's been amazing," said Cataldo. "It's pretty impressive. I'm proud of it."

Of course, there isn't unanimous agreement about the whole idea. "There are always some people that aren't happy," said Cataldo, "but the vast majority think it's a great thing. We never really changed a whole lot. We cut a lot lighter than the standard forest operation. We maintain the roads much better, because profit isn't our driving force. The wildlife comes first; water quality is important. You still have access to the land. Fifty years from now, I think they'll agree it was a really great thing."

The Downeast Lakes Community Forest was an ambitious project, particularly for a rural area in a remote corner of Maine. But in a sense, all community forest projects are ambitious,

because they require that people envision a different future and then work collectively to make it happen. There are many challenges involved, from persuading doubters to raising money – lots and lots of money. In some cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars. In others, millions. Sometimes even tens of millions.

"There's never enough money. There's not enough funding, and these are complicated projects that take a long time, and organizations have to have the capacity and the staying power," said Jennifer Melville.

Martha West Lyman, a founding partner of the Community Forest Collaborative and one of the authors of the paper on community forest "wealth creation," said that the big challenges to such projects include the amount of time they take, the cost, and the need for local "champions" to tout their benefits. Sometimes, it's essential to enlist the support of outside partner organizations that can assist in finding funding sources and, if need be, step in to secure the land until the fundraising goals are met.

Of course, another must for any such undertaking to succeed is the right property. Not just any land will generate enthusiasm for a community forest, but people will rally around the idea of conserving a particular, special parcel. "There will be a significant challenge to any project if one or more of these factors isn't present or doesn't materialize," Lyman noted.

A community forest can be created with small donations, and the small donations are important, but the reality is that that's an uphill battle. Big checks give impetus to a campaign in a way that small ones don't. The federal government's Community Forest Program has contributed funding to a number of community forest projects in New England, including the Cooley-Jericho Community Forest in New Hampshire, the Dorset Town Forest in Vermont, the Plimpton Community Forest in Massachusetts, and the Falmouth Community Forest in Maine. In Maine, the Land for Maine's Future Program has been a big participant in community forest projects. The Farm Cove Community Forest Project's donor list reads like a who's who of philanthropy: in addition to Land for Maine's Future and the Open Space Institute, donors included philanthropist Elmina B. Sewall of Kennebunk, Wal-Mart, The Nature Conservancy, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the C.F. Adams Charitable Trust, and Sweet Water Trust.

The Open Space Institute's Community Forest Fund was created specifically to support community forest projects in northern New England. It raised \$1.6 million from private donors and allocated every bit of it to 15 projects across three states, including ones in Barre, Vermont, Milan, New Hampshire, and West Grand Lake, Maine. OSI is now working to replenish that fund. The U.S. Forest Service has its Community Forest Program, but appropriations are tiny for a national program – only about \$2 million per year.

"Those are the only two [programs] dedicated to community forests," said Julie Renaud Evans of the Northern Forest Center. "But most projects have to compete with all other projects for state funds and grants from private foundations."

Martha Lyman said that, in spite of the challenges, there's still a tremendous potential to create community forests in New England and to turn ordinary town forestland into true

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AMMONOOSUC CONSERVATION TRUST

A guided tour of Cooley-Jericho Community Forest in New Hampshire, created by the Ammonoosuc Conservation Trust and the towns of Easton, Franconia, Landaff, and Sugar Hill.

community forests. Such projects have the potential to attract support from people outside the traditional conservation orbit.

An incident from several years ago sticks in Lyman's mind. It was at a workshop, she remembers. A young man sitting off to the side didn't say a whole lot until the wrap-up and comment period. Then he told the group, "I am not a conservationist and I would not support 'conservation projects,' but I have a young son now, and this community forest idea is something I can do for him – something that will leave a piece of this town for him to enjoy."

For Lyman, that about sums it up: community forests are about the future, and the idea can work on some level for many different types of people.

Meanwhile, back in Raymond, townspeople are still enthusiastic about the creation of the town's new community forest, said Sheila Bourque. She noted that, before the campaign began, the lower areas of the parcel had already been approved for three subdivisions totaling 70 houses. "There's still a feeling of unbelief that we could pull it off, but there's also a feeling of, 'now I don't have to worry about what's going to happen up there,'" she said.

Volunteers were getting ready to begin work on a trail system

on the lower elevations of the property, while the trail-building pros from the Appalachian Mountain Club were preparing to construct a trail over the rugged summit of Pismire Mountain. The permitting was being finalized for a parking lot. And Bourque was pulling together a group to be called Friends of the Community Forest to help with the maintenance of trails and anything else that needs to be done.

"I think honestly it's going to be a gem in Raymond that will ultimately become a destination place for hiking and will draw people to our town," Bourque said. Ruminating on the fact that it took four years to make the community forest a reality, Bourque offered advice for others that a long-distance hiker might recognize. "It's one day at a time. One foot in front of the other. There are going to be down days and you're saying it's never going to happen. What I've learned is that if you keep reaching out to people, well, they're willing to roll up their sleeves to help. You just have to keep plugging."

Joe Rankin is a freelance writer who lives in central Maine. He writes on forestry, nature, and sustainability.