Landscapes
Improving Conservation Practice in the Northeast Megaregion

June 19, 2012
National Museum of the American Indian

Conference Summary

Go big to get it done. That was the sentiment of conservation leaders from across the country at New York’s National Museum of American Indian.

More than 125 conservation professionals, advocates, scientists, planners, philanthropists, and government officials gathered to discuss the ways and means of accelerating large landscape conservation in the 13-state Northeast megaregion. Large landscape conservation refers to public and private collaborations that look beyond political boundaries and property lines to achieve their goals. It’s a growing trend, as highlighted in RPA’s recent report on the 165 landscape conservation initiatives operating in the Northeast megaregion. Local land trusts, municipal officials, national conservation organizations, and public agencies are looking to work together to protect land and water and address critical challenges to conservation – urban growth, creation of transportation and energy infrastructure, and climate change – with fewer staff and financial resources.

The by-invitation event was intended to help improve this practice, and to start discussions on formulating a common agenda for the northeast and the nation. The conference program featured 36 speakers and 14 plenary panels and workshops on critical topics such as conserving fish and wildlife population in a changing climate; establishing market-based conservation programs to protect water quality; finding resources in an era of diminished government support; and setting priorities for urban ecosystems.

While the day’s conversations touched on many aspects of landscape conservation, a few key themes emerged in the workshop discussions and interactive polling. It is critical to create leadership capacity at large landscape initiatives. A primary goal should be the development of strategic conservation plans that engage local government and private landowners. Their narratives should speak to the concerns of local residents and decisions makers and set the stage for effective interaction with local land use plans and large infrastructure proposals. These plans can also create a vehicle for communicating the latest science on climate resiliency to diverse stakeholders in a way that makes it relevant to their concerns.

Why Landscape Conservation Now?

Robert Bendick, Director of U.S. Government Relations, The Nature Conservancy and Co-Chair, Practitioners’ Network for Large Landscape Conservation

Mary Wagner, Associate Chief, US Forest Service

Michael Creasey, Superintendent, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park and Executive Director of the Conservation Study Institute

Kenneth Elowe, Assistant Regional Director - Science Applications, USFWS Northeast Region

The opening plenary addressed the importance of large landscape conservation, and how federal agencies can work with locally organized initiatives to focus on ecological regions to achieve conservation goals. Such work has several key attributes:

- An understanding of the ecological processes that maintain movement and flow across the landscape;
- An emphasis on meeting the needs of people as an integral element;

The report offers specific examples of how practitioners are responding to major challenges related to land-use change, large-scale transportation projects, energy, climate change, and limited funding.
• Design and management solutions that consider how individual sites and a high quality core conservation area work together to sustain the whole system over time;

• Using Geographic Information Systems and other technology to disseminate information and help incorporate this understanding into planning and other decisions: Getting conservation where people actually live.

Understanding the Challenges

Three key challenges for landscape conservation were highlighted in the conference’s second plenary and first set of breakout workshops: Land use, Large Scale Transportation and Energy Infrastructure and Climate Change.

Land Use

Steven Rosenberg, Senior Vice President and Executive Director of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust, Inc., Scenic Hudson

Eileen Swan, Policy Projects, New Jersey Conservation Foundation

Speakers and participants in our land use workshops stressed the challenges of the current piecemeal and conflicting approach to development. Strong home rule and property rights advocacy make considerations of landscape conservation difficult. While comprehensive regional land use planning may not be feasible in every part of the northeast, a great initial step is creating a narrative of the landscape driven by the motivations of the people who live there. Such a public visioning process can show what natural resources are at stake without mandating change. It is essential to engage the industries that determine future development—bankers, real estate investors, developers—to be part of the process. The narrative can lead to programs to direct land conservation to save the most important parcels of land, undertaking transformative high-profile local projects that respond to the regional vision, and establishment and promotion of shared principles for sound development. Measures of success include implementation of regional and local land use rules and plans that reflect local values and support regional conservation goals; the amount of land private land owners have placed under easement; and fragmentation indexes that measure the connectivity of the landscape.

Large Scale Infrastructure

Michael Catania, President, Conservation Resources, Inc.

Chris Miller, Executive Director, Piedmont Environmental Council

Addressing the challenges of large scale energy and transportation infrastructure requires a critical understanding of the industry and its own logics, such as energy demand, so that the real need for the project can be assessed. At the same time, the threat of such projects can catalyze, galvanize, and focus regional conservation and planning action. By planning ahead, landscape conservation initiatives can use mitigation funds and measures intelligently and proactively to achieve conservation goals. Harnessing project opposition to drive landscape conservation relies on a bifurcation of approval and mitigation decisions and a transparent and early public process. Critical steps include technical assistance for participants, identification of priority parcels of project areas, clear program guidelines that leverage other sources of funding, and the right placement of responsibility to administer mitigation funds and insulate decisions from political influences. Measures of success include permanent conservation acquisitions, alternative alignments to avoid critical resources, and natural resource damage assessments that provide justification for mitigation.

Conservation Resources
http://www.conservationresources.org

Piedmont Environmental Council
http://www.pevc.org/

Climate Change

Mark Anderson, Director of Conservation Sciences, Eastern North America Division, The Nature Conservancy

Peter Howell, Executive Vice President, Open Space Institute

Andrew Milliken, North Atlantic LCC Coordinator, USFWS

Translating the science and language of climate change and resiliency to issues that the public cares about can help ensure that this looming responsibility gets the attention of public officials. Drinking water, cold water trout, natural strongholds, and green infrastructure are resources and terms that can communicate resiliency and climate change to diverse stakeholders. While there are some terrific datasets that identify conservation priorities, the northeast is behind in assessing and addressing the risk posed by climate change. Making data and modeling tools consistent across the region and—perhaps even more importantly—ensuring that local land trusts, conservation groups, and planners use this information is critical. Partnerships between large land trusts, federal agencies, or national conservation groups with small land trusts can build the capacity needed to address the communication, mapping, and interpreting science issues. A shared platform where practitioners can input their progress can help track progress over time.

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Improving our Practice

The second set of breakout workshops focused on the practice of landscape conservation. Our presenters and participants discussed best practices across a variety of issues, and identified the specific science, data, planning, outreach, and/or advocacy improvements needed to further the field of large landscape conservation.

Building Leadership

Bill Labich, Regional Conservationist, Highstead

Shawn Johnson, Coordinator, Practitioners’ Network for Large Landscape Conservation, University of Montana

Creating leadership capacity at large landscape initiatives was considered the most important practice by conference participants. Characteristics of successful landscape conservation initiatives includes steering committees that represent municipalities and other organizations that have access to professional staff and funding and bringing them together for regularly scheduled meetings. A mapped conservation vision with targets that help coordinate members’ conservation and fundraising activities is also critical. Some initiatives are used to develop staff skills across organizations, breaking down silos. The landscape initiative needs to be at least one full-time equivalent position with a sense of ownership in the success of the partnership/collaboration. An ability to network is a key skill for that person. The challenge for many coalitions is finding funding for that dedicated staff. Ideally that funding is available at least in part through the contributions of the partnering organizations. This buy-in helps
ensure that collaboration meets a cost/benefit calculation by the individual members. Initiatives established on grants tend to expire with the grants that fund them.

Wildlands and Woodlands: Regional Conservation Partnerships
http://www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org/rcpnetwork

Practitioner’s Network for Large Landscape Conservation
http://www.largelandscapenetwork.org

Creating Strategic Conservation Plans
Wink Hastings, Landscape Architect, Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance, National Park Service

Ole M. Amundsen, Strategic Conservation Program Manager, The Conservation Fund

A strategic conservation plan is an essential tool for encouraging collaboration between organizations at various scales and interests. Such planning is especially important for setting quantifiable goals and objectives. Elements in developing a successful plan include thinking ahead about the questions the plan is designed to answer, readers, and outcomes. Frequent field visits help participants deeply understand the study area. Specific priorities highlight what’s most important. Mapping community assets like a favorite swimming hole helps engage the public in the planning process. Finally, the plan and process should stress implementation, especially needed funding and partnerships, and revisit and revise recommendations regularly. What is often most difficult is getting people engaged in the process so that the vision and identified priorities resonate with various parties. Understanding the differences in the ways groups communicate (eg making maps for non-map readers) and recognizing the boundaries and gaps between partners when determining priorities is critical.

Strategic Conservation Planning: Ole Amundsen
http://web.itq.org/Purchase/ProductDetails.aspx?Product_code=CURR_STRATEGIC

National Park Service: Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program
http://www.nps.gov/nrcc/programs/rtca/index.htm

Engaging Local Government
David Church, Commissioner, Department of Planning, Orange County (NY)

David Kooris, Vice President - Connecticut, Regional Plan Association

Participatory land use planning processes can galvanize local interest in conservation and give officials ownership over the process and comfort in the results that emerge. One strategy is to have community level workshops focus on where to grow – and not where to prohibit growth. By mapping priority growth areas – for example, areas with existing infrastructure – participants can help officials distinguish where development should be contained and where to maximize conservation. Such a framework is especially important in the context of the current economic climate. Another important framework for engaging local government in conservation is by focusing on the natural resources like water supply and treatment. Design guidelines that provide local officials with easy access to best practices provide a useful tool and common vocabulary. The most important challenge is maintaining relationships with local officials and getting them to stick to the conservation goals. Reorganizing state infrastructure grants and loans can help sustain plan implementation over time.

Regional Plan Association: Design Manual
http://www.rpa.org/design-manual

Establishing Market-based Conservation Programs
Al Sample, President, Pinchot Institute for Conservation

William Price, Director of Conservation Programs, Pinchot Institute for Conservation

Eric Sprague, Program Director, Pinchot Institute for Conservation

Market based conservation programs stem from a documented understanding that ecosystem services have economic value that can be translated into cash value. These programs are effective only if a market can be created; participants have a willingness to make conservation the transaction for those services. There is a large existing literature on the economic value of ecosystem services such as carbon emissions and water quality. But trying to zero in on the beneficiaries and the price for a particular ecosystem service in a specific place can challenge the existing science. Moreover the failure of the Chicago Climate Exchange serves as an example that politically-contested policies can’t necessarily be counted on to create those markets long term. Helping ecosystem services grow from small voluntary markets to robust conservation-oriented exchanges – especially in the absence of reliable regulatory interventions – requires addressing a series of critical questions: What is the role of “rented/temporary conservation” vis-a-vis permanent conservation? Can programs encourage northeastern landowners to commit to action given relatively small average parcel size and high land price points? How can programs account for the “free rider” issue, where beneficiaries are willing to pay-in theory, but refuse to do so until all other parties do too.

Pinchot Institute for Conservation: Common Waters
http://www.pinchot.org/go/common_waters

Measuring Success in Large Landscape Conservation
Jad Daley, Director of the Climate Conservation Program, The Trust for Public Land

Kelley Hart, Associate Director, Conservation Vision, The Trust for Public Land

Abigail Weinberg, Conservation Research Manager, Open Space Institute

Establishing specific benchmarks that show how much has been done and by when can help motivate landscape partners to take their effort to the next level. These metrics also provide an instrument to guide revisions to a conservation plan over time. Creating this essential tool requires understanding what is important to various constituencies, finding datasets that already exist and determining measurable targets for each. Metrics can be preliminary and refined over time. A blend of more easily obtainable and short term goals and longer term goals can help ensure progress. Sharing data, and balancing the quality of data versus the relative importance of the data in different areas is important. Creating useful metrics requires effectively integrating the local and landscape scale. For example, local drainage areas and the broader watershed must be considered in order to provide a true picture. Another key challenge is addressing the conservation-restoration continuum. Tracking the fate of high priority conservation targets are relatively easy to measure result given our reliance on layer oriented GIS systems. While much more difficult to measure, regeneration of ecological services is more truly linked to the ecosystem sustainability and economic interests: important for communicating across scales and interests. The capacity to monitor results, especially at the local level, is critical.

Trust for Public Lands: Greenprint
http://www.tpl.org/what-we-do/services/conservation-vision/greenprinting.html

Open Space Institute: Conservation Resources
http://www.osi.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Program_Institute

Can Funders Catalyze Large Landscape Conservation?
Andrew Bowman, Program Director for the Environment, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation

Jenny Russell, Executive Director, Merck Family Fund

Christine O’Donnell, Senior Program Officer, Institutional Investments & Philanthropic Solutions, Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Margaret Waldock, Environment Program Director, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation

Jim Levitt, Director, Program on Conservation Innovation, Harvard Forest and Fellow, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

Climate change and other issues are challenging philanthropy to conserve on a broader scale. Funders can help catalyze
such efforts in a variety of ways. One critical example is wildlife adaptation. Climate change is unpredictable, fast, and severe. Working across broad geographies and large functional landscapes is critical for building resiliency for these populations. This scale also helps ensure that specific parcels selected for protection will be ecologically and economically productive for 100 years to come. Funders have used a variety of strategies to encourage landscape conservation, including revolving loan funds that provide capital funding to the range of groups working in a defined geography and support for collaborative partnerships that provide technical support and administrative capacity. Long term unrestricted funding for the individual partner organizations is also absolutely essential – and sometimes neglected. Smaller family foundations can also play a small but critical role, especially for long-term support in localized areas. Personal experience and connections are key to engaging these family foundations. Foundations are constantly seeking other funders to join initiatives; family foundations in particular are interested in matching grants. There are some important challenges to encouraging large, medium, and small funders to work together across landscapes. Capacity metrics, especially for partnerships, take lots of work and are hard to measure. There needs to be a common vision between groups and a clear idea of what each partner’s role is. While diminished, public programs – like the AGO initiatives – can play an important role in bringing philanthropy around the table by leveraging money.

Setting Priorities for Urban Ecosystems

Phillip Rodbell, Program Specialist, Urban and Community Forestry, USDA Forest Service Northeastern Area
Sarah Charlop Powers, Deputy CEO, Natural Areas Conservancy
Ilyssa Manspeizer, Director, Park Development & Conservation, Mount Washington Community Development Corporation

There are 100 million acres of urban land in the nation. Their restoration offers a specific opportunity to improve the lives of city residents while providing important ecosystem services and maintaining wildlife. The local community must be engaged with these efforts for them to work. The goal is to build an “ecosystem army” of people working to restore nature in their cities. It is critical that organizers not try to tell people what’s good for them but show what is possible to create in a park. Such efforts can provide a safe space for different people to work together – especially kids, distinct ethnicities, and a range of income classes – and help ensure adequate stewardship. A special set of skills is required to “retrofit” landscapes of nature into cities. The Forest Service has created tools to help calculate landscape tree cover and value of ecosystem services. But non-subjective assessments that make it easier to see change over time or across different parks have proven to be a challenge. More research should be done to see how invasive species can be used to make natural areas more sustainable. Parks now tend to plant all native plants and remove invasive species. It is an unanswered question as to whether a native forest is more resilient than one with invasive plants.

Engaging Private Landowners

Mary Tyrell, Executive Director, Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry, Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies

To be successful it is essential to know your audience. Very distinct messages appeal to the four types of land owners. “Working the Land Owners” want information to make their own decisions about harvests that leave land in good shape for their heirs. They may have fixed ideas of what’s good for their land and a mistrust of authority and expertise. “Supplemental Income Owners” are motivated by either timber or investment income. Messages that appeal are the financial benefits of investing in professional advice, cost-share and other incentive programs. “Woodland Retreat Owners” want healthy woods and wildlife. Money is important, but a secondary concern. Barriers include a lack of knowledge/confidence and a general perception that woods should be left alone. The key motivations for “Uninvolved Owners” are unclear. Investment value messages may resonate, as might reducing taxes and land management hassles. It is important to measure progress in outreach efforts: How many people are showing up to events, how many are you reaching directly, are they the right people? Identify an outcome indicator, like a specific behavior that people will do, and an impact indicator, such as how many acres were conserved. Additional data (with longer and larger samples) to monitor how attitudes of the four groups may have changed in recent years would help refine these messages.

Sponsors

This conference was sponsored by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; the US Forest Service Northeastern Area; and the National Park Service Northeast Office. Co-sponsors include the US Fish and Wildlife Service North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies; Piedmont Environmental Council, and the Practitioners’ Network for Large Landscape Conservation. This conference benefited from the insight and effort of a steering committee including representatives from Open Space Institute, Land Trust Alliance, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Piedmont Environmental Council, Pinelands Preservation Alliance, Highstead, Practitioner’s Network for Large Landscape Conservation, US Forest Service Northeastern Area, and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The Practitioners’ Network for Large Landscape Conservation is an alliance of professionals and citizens engaged in leading, managing, researching, advocating, funding, educating or setting policy to advance large landscape conservation initiatives. For more information visit them at: www.largelandscapenetwork.org

Peer Exchange

RPA’s Peer Exchange Program provides grants to organizations working to forward landscape conservation in the Northeast. The grants finance information exchange between three matched pairs of emerging initiatives and established practitioners with proven track records of success. A series of workshops will develop solutions that aid in the strategic mission of the emerging initiatives. For more information visit: www.rpa.org/northeastlandscapes/pep

Visit the website to learn more: www.rpa.org/northeastlandscapes