

The 2013 Regional Conservation Partnership (RCP) Network Gathering

Collaborative Conservation Practitioners Gather in New England

November 13, 2013 marked the fourth annual gathering of the Regional Conservation Partnership (RCP) Network, bringing together 116 members of the conservation community from private and public organizations across New England and eastern New York.

Representatives from 30 out of 39 RCPs discussed topics important to the success of the innovative conservation taking shape across our region as people increasingly work together across town and even state boundaries to achieve community-grounded conservation that is meaningful on a regional scale. Agencies, funders, and others interested in large landscape conservation were also well represented at the conference.

Organized and funded by the Highstead Foundation with additional support from the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, the RCP Network Gathering included workshops and panel discussions on science and conservation planning, funding, and conservation of diverse landscapes. There were also ample opportunities to network with peers on strategies to catalyze RCP conservation success.



2013 RCP Gathering at a Glance

- 116 total attendees
- 30 out of 39 RCPs represented
- 4.5/5 overall attendee experience
- 14 workshops and panels on priority conservation issues
- 1st keynote speaker

“Great day to meet people and learn from each other!”

The conference is part of a growing suite of services and resources offered by the RCP Network and many of the November 13 presentations can be found on the [website](#).

Large Landscape Conservation: A Local and Global Imperative

This year’s RCP Network Gathering featured for the first time a keynote speaker, Dr. Gary Tabor, Director of the Center for Large Landscape Conservation and noted champion of large-scale conservation in North America for 30 years.

Dr. Tabor’s stirring address focused on the evolution of and global need for conservation at the large landscape scale. Although he emphasized his national and international work, most notably his involvement in the Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) Initiative, Dr. Tabor also grounded his talk in the current work of northeastern initiatives including Two Countries, One Forest and Wildlands and Woodlands.

He spoke particularly about the power of “collective impact” as conservation has increasingly become a multiple community enterprise, and the trend towards effective “whole system collaborative conservation”—exactly what RCPs embody as they work together across New England to implement conservation that is both community-led and regionally significant.



Encouraging attendees to think outside of the box (literally) when it comes to land preservation, Dr. Tabor illustrated how ecosystems and animal passages are not naturally confined to a square area on a map. He stated that we must work towards conserving entire ecosystems and creating a large “operating space” for nature and people while we still have this opportunity in the northeast and across the globe.

One compelling slide illustrated how policy makers typically choose conservation targets that are far lower than what scientists believe are necessary to save the ecological fabric of the natural world. Dr. Tabor referenced the Wildlands and Woodlands vision, which calls for doubling the current pace of conservation in our region, and quoted Wayne Gretzky in asking people to “skate to where the puck is going” to stay ahead of the conservation challenges that lie before us.

Dr. Tabor’s message was reinforced by the morning panel, which showcased a range of innovative approaches to RCP conservation in the region. The panel included Wolfe Tone with the Trust for Public Land, who spoke about advancing the large White Mountains to Moosehead Lake RCP in Maine; Mark Berry with the Downeast Lakes Land Trust, who spoke about carbon offsets for forest conservation; and Jim Shallow with Audubon Vermont, who spoke about effective landowner outreach techniques, including Foresters for the Birds, that inspire landowners and increase interest in sound stewardship and enduring conservation.



Keynote speaker Dr. Gary Tabor spoke on “Large Landscape Conservation: A Local and Global Imperative.”

Conservation Informed by Science

Two workshops connected conservation practitioners to new science that will help them succeed in their work. Harvard Forest researchers presented on *Changes to the Land: Four Scenarios for the Future of the Massachusetts Landscape*. This study (available at wildlandsandwoodlands.org) modeled four different future land scenarios for Massachusetts and estimated the impacts of each on vital ecosystem services including flood control, wildlife habitat, and climate mitigation. The scenario that conserved forests, clustered development, and emphasized sustainable forestry provided the most benefits to people and nature over time. This study helps RCP leaders make the case for forest conservation and smart growth strategies.

The North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership and the Open Space Institute (OSI) presented the preliminary findings of an OSI-funded pilot project to help the partnership craft a conservation plan that includes a new focus on climate resilience. The Nature Conservancy’s (TNC) climate resilience data and approach were used to add an emphasis on diverse geophysical settings and landscape complexity. The resulting maps highlight sites that offer the best chance for sustaining viable populations of plants and animals even as the climate warms and species composition and needs change. Another goal of the project is to craft practical approaches that help other RCPs understand and use the TNC data to inform their own conservation planning.



Mark Berry spoke about implementing the first forest carbon offset project in New England under new California law and garnering significant revenue for carbon conservation that can now go into additional land protection efforts.





RCP Roundtables

In one roundtable exercise, RCP members mapped their landowner outreach, science, stewardship, and land conservation activities in the Connecticut River Blueway and identified ways for leveraging greater coordination across the watershed. In the other, people well-versed in organizational development, fundraising with volunteer boards, and collaborative multi-parcel campaigns were on hand to answer questions posed by RCP leaders from across the region. See the RCP Network [website](#) for more information and presentation materials on these important subjects.

Wildland, Woodland, & Farmland

Two workshops delved into the nuances of protecting lands for their wilderness, timber, and local food values. Practitioners from the Northeast Wilderness Trust and Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership identified the benefits to society from establishing wilderness areas and a collaborative approach to stewarding wildlands within a regional landscape. Kestrel Land Trust, The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and Land for Good used case studies to illustrate the pitfalls and challenges to conserving farm and timber land, key elements to include in easements for each, and the critical yet often overlooked step of securing access to productive farmland soils for new farmers.

Conservation Finance

New and “tried and true” approaches to financing conservation were the subjects of two workshops. The Trust for Public Land urged RCPs to create a “funding quilt” that uses local bond campaigns and involves local and state legislators in their partnership. Leaders from the Orange County Headwaters Project, the Quabbin to Cardigan Partnership and the Massachusetts Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs demonstrated how due diligence funds and state tax credits can accelerate the pace of conservation.

Ten Steps to RCP Success

RCPs often employ similar steps to launch their collaborative endeavor and move towards successful conservation on the ground. Highstead has termed these stages of development “emerging, maturing, and conserving.” Highstead Regional Conservationist Bill Labich analyzed the key elements of RCP success with academic colleagues and the results were published in the September 2013 issue of the *Journal of Forestry: Regional Conservation Partnerships in New England* (Labich, et al.).

These insights, further informed by RCP outreach and feedback, can also be found in more practical detail in the preliminary document, the *RCP Check List: Ten Steps to Success*, distributed at the conference. It is through RCP members sharing both successes and failures with peers that RCPs adapt and develop more effective approaches to collaborative conservation. RCPs are encouraged to use the resources on the [RCP Network site](#) and to join the [LinkedIn](#) group for additional networking opportunities.



What are RCPs?

The Importance of the RCP Movement to the Future of the New England Landscape

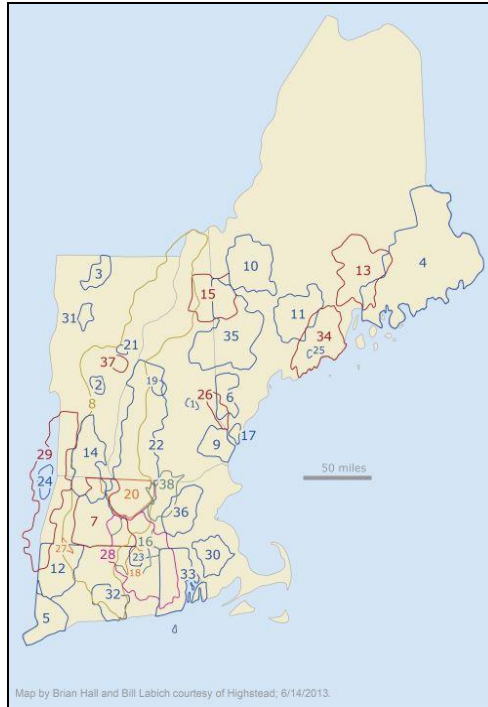
Regional conservation partnerships (RCPs) are the new face of conservation in New England: collaborative, community-grounded, and focused on long-term conservation success to sustain both nature and people through the generations. RCPs are about local and regional land trusts and community leaders joining forces with larger conservation organizations and public agencies to conserve the broader landscapes they love and that sustain us all.

RCPs are New England's response to a growing awareness that we cannot conserve one parcel, one species, or one fishing hole. We must conserve whole ecosystems—large landscapes that sustain New England's heritage and its future. Our forested landscapes protect our water supplies, shelter our wildlife, mitigate climate change, and reduce flooding in a time of increasing extreme weather events. Conserved lands sustain our communities through jobs; fuel and wood products; fresh, local food; and healthy outdoor recreation.

But it is a race against time. *Wildlands and Woodlands: A Vision for the New England Landscape* (2010) documented how each New England state is now losing forests on a net annual basis, and that we must double the current pace of conservation if we are to keep ahead of the development curve. A look at the “sprawl frontier” in each state provides a compelling image: development pressures in our region are extraordinary, and the conservation response must be extraordinary as well.

And RCPs are extraordinary. They are bottom-up instead of top-down; they are deeply collaborative; and in their long-term commitment and community focus they address the central issue of conservation in our

region: the landscape is an enormous patchwork of many, many privately owned lands. With 86% of the landscape in private hands, much of it small parcels, we must focus on reaching and engaging landowners regarding conservation and sound stewardship of their lands if we are to succeed. It will take time and commitment, and it will take the collective impact of many partners working toward a set of shared conservation goals.



An *interactive map* of New England RCPs is available at wildlandsandwoodlands.org/rcpnetwork.

In the late 1990s, there were four RCPs in New England. Today there are nearly 40, with sizes ranging from 12,000 acres in two towns to seven million acres stretching across four states. A few years ago, many RCPs did not know others were doing similar collaborative conservation work even in their own state. Today, RCPs have formed an active network and are sharing best tools and practices, and moving more quickly to tangible conservation. Funders, fortunately, are starting to take notice, with some increase in public and private monies targeted to RCP initiatives.

RCPs are working on more than 60% of New England's landscape, and that percentage continues to grow. The RCP map shows the breathtaking opportunity we have today to create regional habitat corridors and to achieve conservation at a meaningful scale. RCPs are seizing that opportunity and creating the enduring social infrastructure for conservation success. Fueled by enough funding to move expeditiously forward and to achieve conservation on the ground, RCPs will play a vital role in securing New England's natural and cultural heritage for the generations that follow.

