



Department of  
Environmental  
Conservation



Cornell University

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance



Photo by Ingrid Haeckel

# Engaging local planning agencies through the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan

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# Hudson River Estuary Program

## Core Mission

- Ensure **clean water**
- Protect and restore fish, wildlife, and their **habitats**
- Provide **river access**
- Help communities adapt to **climate change**
- Conserve **natural scenery**



Photo by Laura Heady



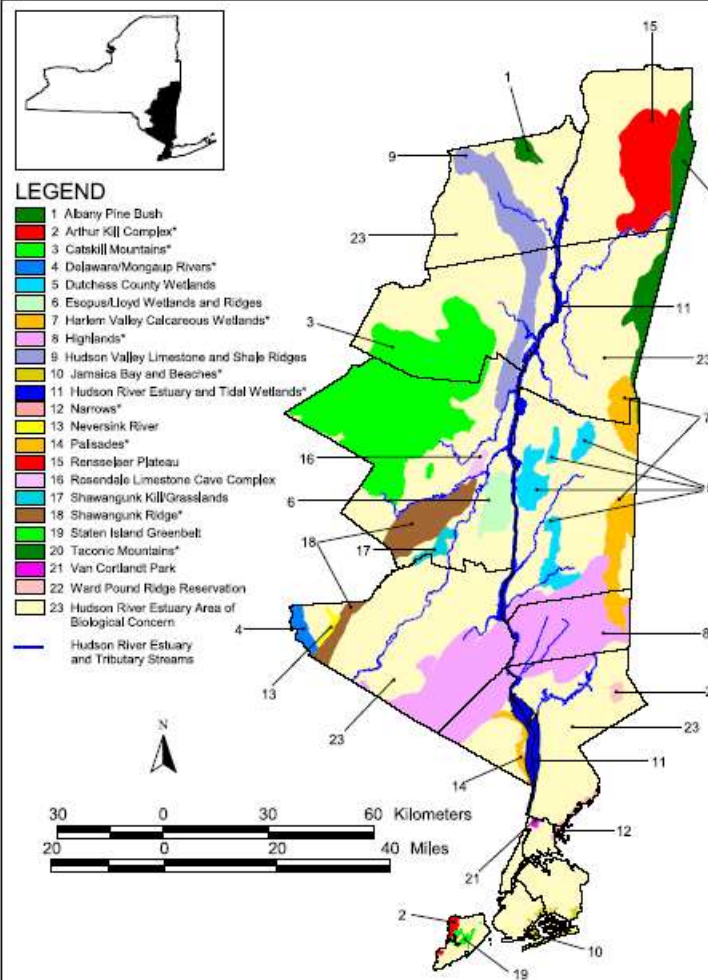
# Sprawl threatens the region's habitats and water

Individual land-use decisions in the Hudson Valley's 251 municipalities can lead to death by 1000 cuts.



# Conservation and Land Use Outreach Approach:

- **Improve understanding** of natural areas and their value.
- **Fill in gaps** in biological data available to municipal officials.
- **Provide guidance** on how to incorporate data and conservation principles into local planning.



# Challenge: lack of structure for regional conservation planning in the Hudson Valley

- Regional planning commissions largely absent
- County planning – wide varying interest in natural resources, limited staff
- Municipal conservation advisory councils not widely established everywhere



*Photo by Laura Heady*

# The Rensselaer Plateau



# Opportunity for Partnership

- Limited municipal interest
- Only 2 conservation commissions
- Lack of capacity for conservation planning at county level

BUT

- Motivated individuals
- Several organizations with conservation interest



Photo by Karen Strong

# How to begin?

2008 – A group of volunteers want to:

- Develop a Regional Conservation Plan
- Engage 11 Towns

Rensselaer County (especially eastern half) is quite conservative.



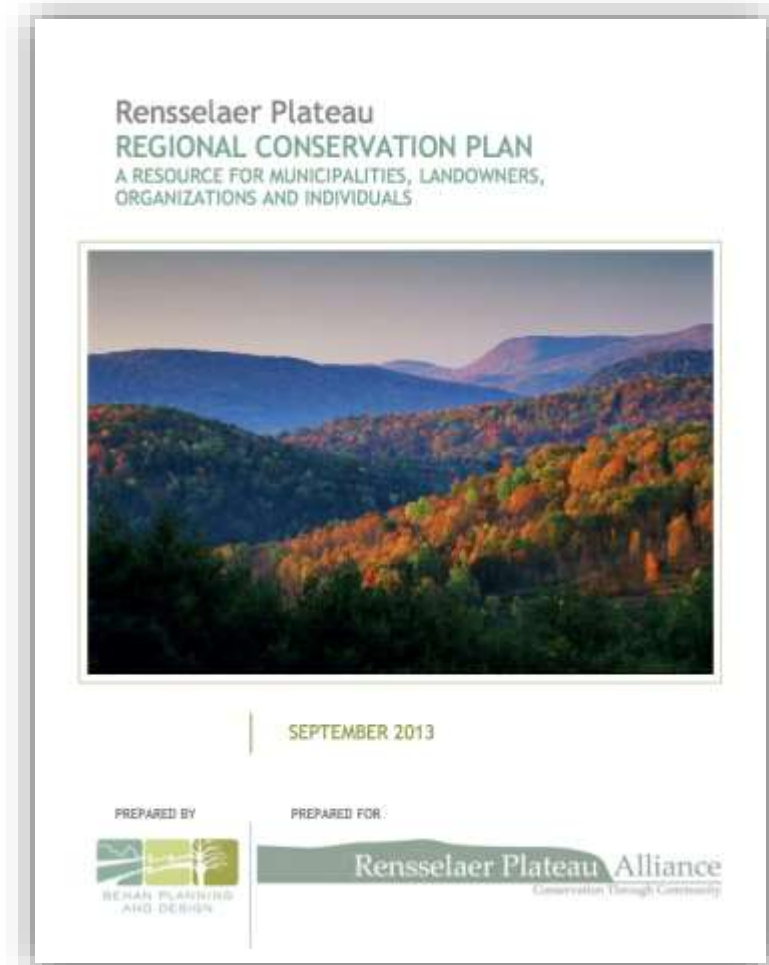


# The Plan

## 1) Crafted message:

- Respect for Home Rule of Towns
- Respect for Landowner Rights
- Grassroots (we're your neighbors)
- Work cooperatively

## 2) Meet 2 on 1 with Town Supervisors (listening)



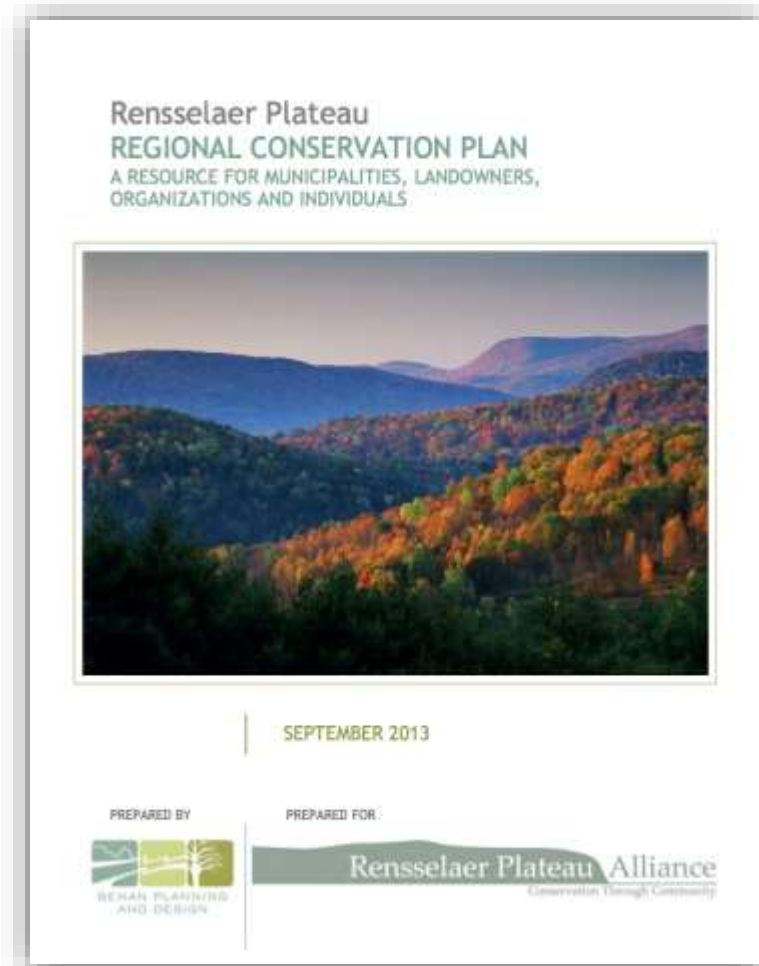
# The Plan (cont.)

3) Present to Town Boards

4) Town Supervisor's Meeting  
(with dinner)

**The Ask:**

**Participate in the development of  
a Regional Conservation Plan**



# The Process

Public workshops, stakeholder meetings, community values mapping meetings at various locations.

Ecological Study

Economic Study

Community Values

What are your ideas?

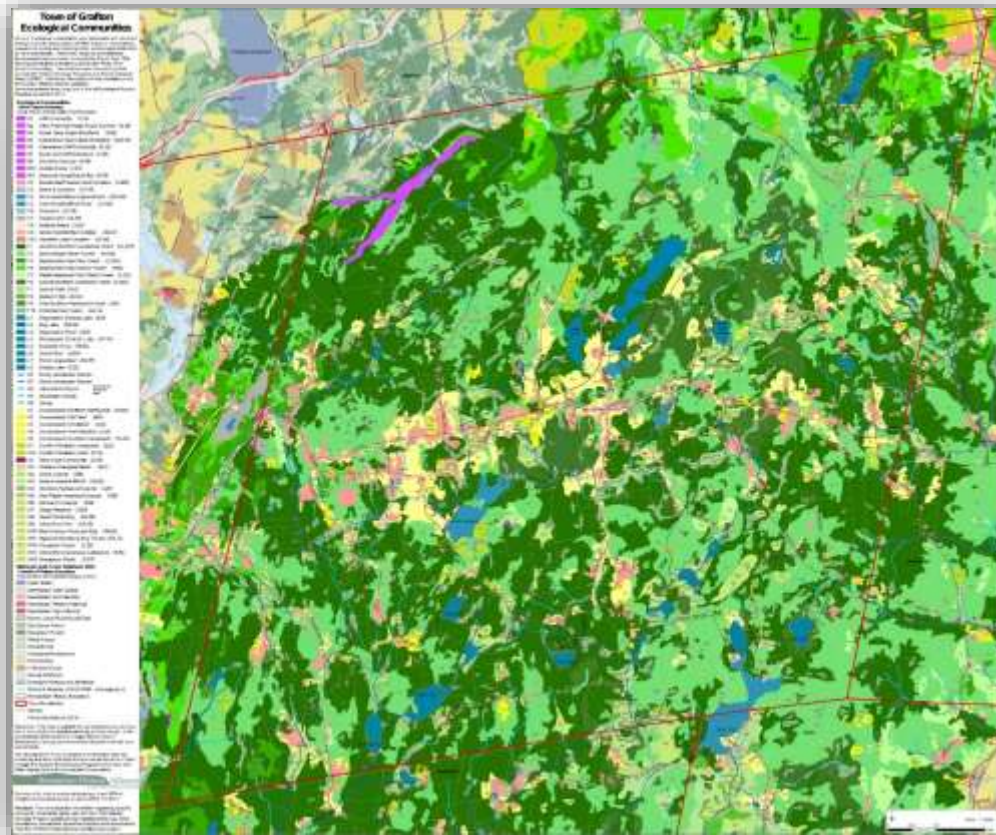
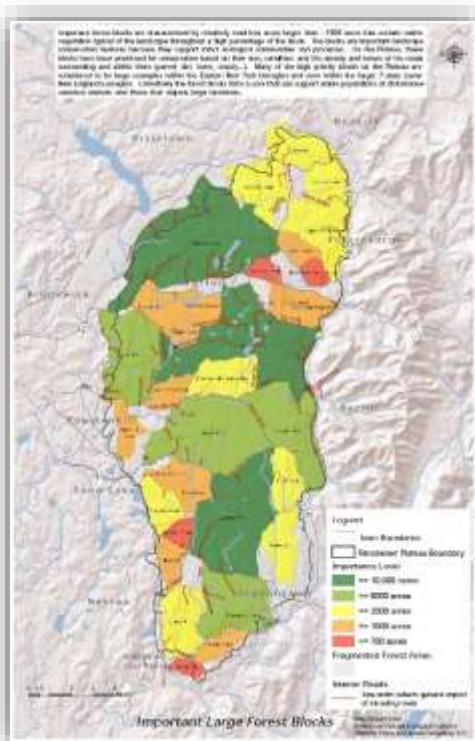
What are your concerns?



Photos by Karen Strong

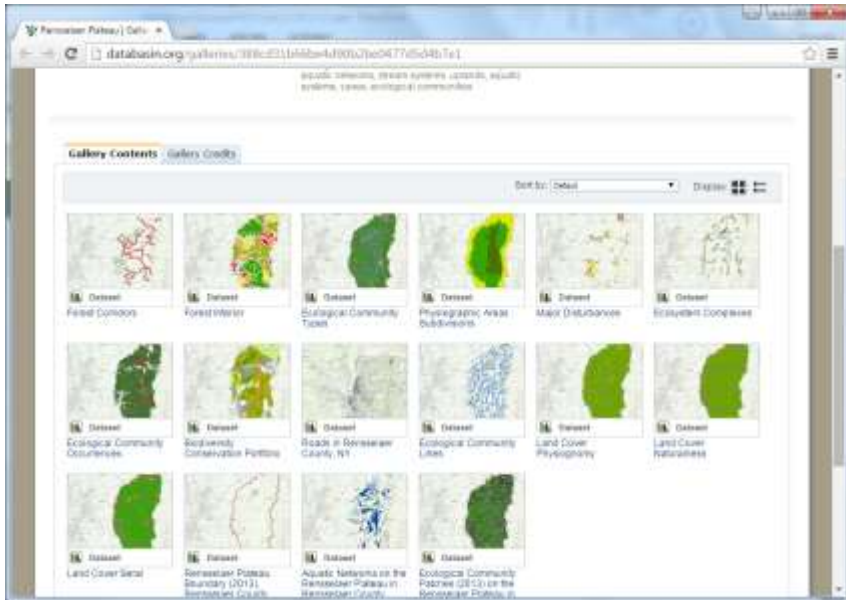
# Translating the plan into products

## - Maps



# Translating the plan into products

## - Online Tools



Red Maple-Hardwood Sw... x

← → ↻ www.guides.nynhp.org/guide.php?id=9898

New York Natural Heritage Program

HOME ANIMAL GUIDES PLANT GUIDES COMMUNITY GUIDES ADVANCED SEARCH

Summary Conservation and Management Range Identification Comments Classification Additional Resources

Printer Friendly Version (PDF)

### Red Maple-Hardwood Swamp

**System:** Palustrine  
**SubSystem:** Forested Mineral Soil Wetlands

**State Protection:** Not Listed  
**Federal Protection:** Not Listed

**State Rarity Rank:** S4  
**Global Rarity Rank:** G5

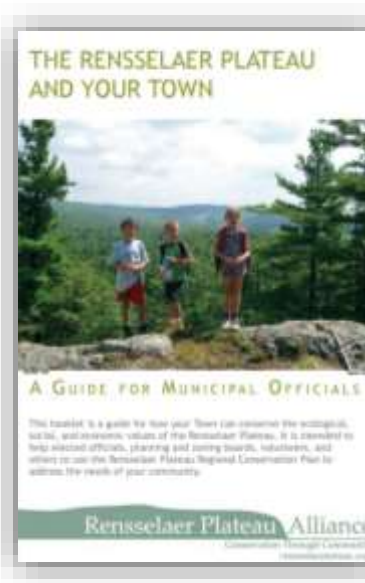
**Did you know?**  
 Jewelweed, or touch-me-not, is an herb found in red maple-hardwood swamps. Its name comes from the jewel-like silvery coating on its leaves that is only evident when the leaves are submerged in water. The silvery covering is actually a thin layer of air trapped in microscopic leaf hairs. The plant was nicknamed touch-me-not because of its seed capsules, which split and coil when triggered by the wind or a touch, expelling the seeds and dispersing them up to four feet away.

Troy Weldy at Grand Pond Swamp, red maple hardwood swamp

Timothy G. Howard

# Translating the plan into products

## - User Guides



# The Results

Skeptics and naysayers become supporters,

Town Supervisor meetings continue (semi-annual),

Towns are engaged, supportive and open to using the Regional Conservation Plan,

- Several towns adopt Plan as a resource,
- 3 towns work together on Plateau grant



# From planning to practice: reaching land-use decision-makers

Hudsonia Ltd.



- 4-hour training including:
  - Overview of plan contents
  - Intro to maps and online tools
  - Principles of biodiversity
  - Mock subdivision design exercise maps from the plan
  - Land use tools and strategies
- 2014-15: 3 workshops; 49 participants from 8 municipalities





# Major Conservation Principles for locating and designing development projects

- Avoid or minimize habitat fragmentation
- Maintain and restore connections between habitat patches or streams and their floodplains
- Establish and maintain broad buffer zones around sensitive areas
- Maintain natural disturbance processes
- Create no additional runoff of rainwater or snowmelt (and minimize impervious surfaces)

# Land use workshop testimonials

*“The overall experience in the workshop was phenomenal! I will share this information with my fellow Planning Board members to guide our decisions.”*

*“The workshop opened my mind to the ecological significance of the Plateau.”*



# Lessons from the Rensselaer Plateau (and the greater Hudson Valley region)

- Take advantage of the conservation planning process to engage municipalities early and often
- Develop customized tools and trainings to reach your target planning audience
- Be sensitive to the local land use climate and take it slow (don't tell people what to do; present a range of options)

# Questions?

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[www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4920.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4920.html)

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