Land Use Planning for Forest & Wildlife Connectivity

What is land use planning?

The idea behind local planning is fairly simple: Community members discuss their values and vision for their town five, twenty, or thirty years down the road, and then develop policies and actions that will get them there. These discussions typically focus on topics such as transportation, housing, jobs and economic development, community services, facilities, and natural resources - including how and where land is used for each. Just as importantly, planning helps us think about how these things interact – from both a human and natural resources perspective.

The Municipal Plan

A municipal (or “town”) plan outlines the community’s vision and then the goals, policies, and actions that will help them implement it. Once adopted, this plan becomes the principal policy document that guides local government decision-making. It informs the capital budget process and serves as the basis for developing different types of land use regulation, such as zoning or subdivision regulations, and any implementation actions must conform to the town plan. While typically a visionary document, the town plan can carry weight in the regulatory arena, such as Act 250 proceedings, since state-reviewed development must conform with town plan policies. In Vermont, towns may choose to plan, but are not required to do so.

Planning in Vermont

Municipal planning is informed by Vermont’s planning statute (Chapter 117), which lays out state planning and development goals. These goals include promoting compact settlement surrounded by rural countryside, strengthening agricultural and forest industries, and maintaining and improving the quality of air, water, wildlife, and land resources. Conformance with the state’s overarching vision and goals for planning and development is not required, but conformance is a prerequisite to obtaining certain state grants.
For municipalities that choose to plan, Chapter 117 requires that the municipal plan include 12 elements, including several related to natural resources. Natural resource-related requirements include:

- A statement of policies on the preservation of rare and irreplaceable natural areas, scenic and historic features and resources;
- A statement of objectives, policies, and programs to guide the future growth and development of land, public services, and facilities, and to protect the environment; and
- A land use plan and map that include a statement of present and prospective land uses, including those areas proposed for forests, recreation, agriculture, open space, and commercial, recreational, and industrial development.

**Planning for Wildlife Habitat & Forest Connectivity**

Many strategies are available for your community to promote wildlife and forest connectivity. Some of these strategies relate to non-regulatory policies outlined in the town plan, while others relate to regulatory policies, such as defining where certain land use should occur, or how impacts can be minimized through the development review process. The following are several steps to consider:

1. **Identifying Natural Resource Features & Community Values**

   One of the first steps in planning for forests and wildlife is inventorying and mapping your community’s natural resources. You’ll want to identify resources such as natural communities, the location and extent of forest blocks, significant forest and natural resource features, and wildlife habitat and travel corridors. Additionally, you can ask residents to “map” the natural areas they value – for instance, where are the best areas to ski or hike, view wildlife, and hunt or fish? These places often overlap with areas that are ecologically important.

   Once these areas have been identified, try to understand if these areas are threatened by future development, or are adequately protected through land use policies or programs that are designed to conserve land, such as conservation easements or the Use Value Appraisal (UVA) Program, etc.

2. **Information Sharing & the Bigger Picture**

   While the overarching idea of land use planning might be simple, deciding which strategies will best implement your community’s vision is more complex. There will undoubtedly be diverse interests, needs, and priorities among residents. The key to success is creating an informed and engaged citizenry.

   One of the ways that your town can ensure that the public is informed is by sharing the findings from the natural resources and values inventory and ensuring that everyone understands how these findings fit into the bigger picture at the local, regional, and landscape levels. For instance, part of understanding the bigger picture might involve a discussion of the location of habitat blocks (an area of natural cover surrounded by roads, development, and agriculture) within and outside the town’s...
boundaries. Generally speaking, bigger habitat blocks support a greater diversity of species and fulfill more of those species’ basic needs, such as food and shelter. Some animals, like bears, need access to tens of thousands of acres of habitat to fulfill their needs. This means that your community – and the planning and development decisions it makes – may play an important role at the regional and even landscape scale.

3. Creating Goals, Policies and Moving Toward Action

Once community members consider the town’s natural resources, the next step is to engage residents and community groups in sharing their ideas for a vision and goals. Once these have been established, community members can begin to consider strategies that will implement their vision.

And, there are many strategies from which to choose. Some are regulatory in nature, setting out requirements for landowners on how land can be developed with natural resource protections in mind. For example, the town might establish a forest or conservation zoning district, or a wildlife overlay district, with specific standards that control what can be built and how in order to help maintain large forest blocks and wildlife habitat. Other regulatory strategies include establishing subdivision regulations with standards for maintaining intact forests and wildlife habitat, incentivizing clustering and Planned Unit Developments with open space requirements, and more.

Some strategies are non-regulatory, which means they are voluntary in nature. Examples of these include: conservation easements, enrolling private lands in the UVA program, establishing a dedicated fund for conservation projects, and designating a town forest.

For more information about planning for natural resources at the landscape, natural community, and species levels, please refer to Conserving Vermont’s Natural Heritage: A Guide to Community-Based Planning for the Conservation of Vermont’s Fish, Wildlife, and Biological Diversity at http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/library/maps/Community_Wildlife_Program/complete.pdf.


Tips for Getting Started

Every town is at a different point in the planning and implementation process. Municipal plans must be readopted every five years, and are the basis for any regulatory or non-regulatory steps you wish to take. A first step that you can take to help plan for forests and wildlife is to understand where your community currently stands with planning and implementation. What documents and regulations exist? What efforts have been undertaken in the past, or continue in the present? Which of the actions in the town plan have already been completed? Maybe your community has already mapped its natural resources, but never created specific policies in the municipal plan. Or, maybe your community has excellent forest and wildlife policies, but the recommended actions haven’t been implemented in zoning or subdivision standards. Learning what has come before can help you avoid reinventing the wheel. Wherever your community is in the planning process, it is never too late to get involved.
Transportation Planning for Forest & Wildlife Connectivity

Wildlife: Moving Across the Landscape

Vermont falls within the northern Appalachian/Acadian region, a forested landscape rich in wildlife that stretches from the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts and the Adirondack Mountains in New York to the vast woods of Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Québec. As a result, Vermont serves as a crossroads for wide-ranging mammals – like black bear, moose, bobcat, and fisher – searching for food, suitable habitat, and mates, all of which are necessary for their own survival and their species’ health and genetic diversity. Movement of individual animals is often from one block of forest to the next, but movement of genes and genetic diversity in a population of wildlife can take longer to “travel,” involving the movement of many individuals across long distances over many generations.

Fragmentation of Forests & Wildlife Corridors

While each species has its own unique set of needs, wide-ranging mammals share an important one: they need to be able to travel long distances, ideally through large forested areas with minimal human contact. Unfortunately, in Vermont and across the northeast U.S. and Canada, large blocks of forest are increasingly isolated from one another. As development by people – including homes, stores, roads, power lines, and more – expands across towns and hillsides, large forested areas are broken up into smaller, oftentimes isolated patches. This process is called “fragmentation.” The resulting islands of habitat cannot always meet the life needs of wide-ranging mammals, which in turn forces them to travel across roads and through cities and towns.
Roads as a Fragmenting Force

Roads connect people and goods to the places that they need to go, but they also pose significant barriers for wildlife movement. As wide-ranging mammals attempt to fulfill their daily needs, they often have no other choice but to cross roads. Sometimes crossings are successful, but all too often, they can result in vehicle-wildlife collisions, a source of severe injury or mortality for animals and humans alike.

Transportation Solutions:

1. Limit the Extension of New Roads in Undeveloped Areas

There are many ways to reduce the impacts roads have on wildlife, chief among them the prevention of fragmentation in the first place. While significant fragmentation may already exist in your region, there are many ways to help prevent its spread in the future. For example, your town or region can direct new development to existing downtown or designated growth areas through incentives, decreasing pressure on forested lands. Additionally, the local selectboard has the power to adopt road and trail policies or ordinances. With these, the selectboard can restrict or prohibit the upgrading of existing rural Class 4 roads and legal trails to serve new development, among many other things. Managing roads and development in these kinds of ways can benefit wildlife and also save communities money in the long run, while helping to sustain sense of place, recreational opportunities, and other community values.

2. Mitigate the Impacts of Existing Roads in Wildlife Crossing Areas

You can also work to improve the safety of existing roads for wildlife and people, especially those in priority crossing areas. If you’re not sure where the priority crossing areas are in your town or region, you can research this by:

- Working with the Staying Connected Initiative to develop a map of high priority road crossings;

- Researching road kill and transportation accidents that involved wildlife;

- Tracking and recording wildlife sightings. This can be a great way to engage local citizens and tap their knowledge and interest.

Once you know how to prioritize the roads in your town/region, you can pick from a number of strategies. For instance, you can work to lower the speed limit along high priority stretches of road.

For more information, please see the Resources handout in your folder or download a copy online at: http://stayingconnectedinitiative.org/resources/.
(especially areas that have a history of wildlife related traffic accidents). You can also work with others (i.e. the conservation commission, the local road crew, and the regional planning commission) to conduct a culvert inventory that takes wildlife crossings into consideration. By doing so, when a culvert is scheduled for replacement or fails to function properly, you’ll be prepared to recommend improvements that benefit wildlife. The same goes for assessing larger infrastructure: If a bridge needs to be improved or rebuilt in the future, consider how this could be accomplished while at the same time increasing flood resiliency and improving the safe passage of animals. Often, enlarging a structure can lead to lowered maintenance costs and increased lifespan, as well as benefits to terrestrial and aquatic wildlife.

**Tips for Getting Started**

Transportation solutions can take many forms – some may involve substantial design and cost, while others cost little or nothing and need only the will and backing of the community. It’s up to you to decide what makes the most sense in your community. Gather a group of people who are interested in this issue and explore the options together, and don’t forget to contact the Staying Connected Initiative for help!

*Forest Fragmentation in Vermont*
Protecting Land for Wildlife

What is Land Protection?

Individuals choose to protect land from development for a variety of reasons: to support wildlife habitat, working forests, agriculture, recreation, drinking water, and even scenic beauty. The Staying Connected Initiative (SCI) is especially interested in protecting lands for wildlife in key habitat linkages in Vermont and beyond. From 2009 to early 2013, SCI partners assisted private landowners in completing permanent land protection projects on nearly 300,000 acres that contribute to landscape connectivity in the Northern Appalachian/Acadian region of the U.S. and Canada. Projects covering an additional 30,000 acres of important lands for connectivity are anticipated to be finalized by the end of 2014.

Ways to Protect Lands for Wildlife:

1. Conservation Easements

A private landowner can work with a non-profit land trust to conserve a property with a conservation easement. A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that limits the type or amount of development on one or more parcels of land. While limitations are placed on development, other activities are allowed and even encouraged – such as farming, maple sugaring, recreation, and woodlot management. Each easement is unique and is designed with a purpose and the landowner’s goals in mind – such as the protection of wildlife habitat and landscape connectivity. Forestland properties may be eligible for state and federal programs that provide funds to purchase conservation easements, such as the federal Forest Legacy Program.

2. Municipal Conservation Funds and Town Forests

A municipal government can also identify important lands for conservation and allocate funding for their protection via a conservation fund – a dedicated pot of money for conservation projects. The publication, Community Strategies for Vermont’s Forests and Wildlife, explains:
Funds for conservation can be raised in response to an immediate opportunity... or they can be put into a reserve fund so that money is available when opportunities arise in the future. A reserve fund, adopted in accordance with 24 V.S.A. §2804, serves as a “savings account” that can be carried forward into future fiscal years.¹

For example, the money in a conservation fund can be allocated for the purchase of a conservation easement from a private landowner who owns a parcel in a key wildlife corridor. The conservation easement would be held by a qualified land trust or government agency, protecting the designated lands in perpetuity from development and fragmentation.

The money in a conservation fund can also be allocated to purchase private land outright (i.e., full fee value and rights) to create or expand a Town Forest — a forested area that is owned and managed by the municipality and which can be utilized for recreation, wildlife habitat, wood production, drinking water protection, etc.

Federal and state funds are also available to municipalities to create or expand town forests, including grants from the federal Community Forest Program,² Vermont Housing & Conservation Board,³ and Stateside Land and Water Conservation Fund.⁴

3. Acquisition by a Public Agency

The State of Vermont or the federal government (Green Mountain National Forest, Conte National Wildlife Refuge) may be interested in purchasing parcels important for wildlife habitat and landscape-connectivity, especially if adjacent to or nearby land currently owned by the public agency.

4. The Use Value Appraisal (Current Use) Program

Private landowners can also enroll their parcel in the Use Value Appraisal or “Current Use” Program — a program that is run by the State of Vermont to help ensure that forests and farms are taxed for their productive use, rather than their development value. In order to be eligible, a forested parcel must be at least 25 acres or larger with two additional acres if a residence is present. This program reduces the tax burden on landowners, creating an incentive to keep the lands intact rather than subdividing or selling them.

It is important to remember that this program does not offer permanent protection of lands; landowners can remove their property from the program to develop it by paying a penalty. Please note

² http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/programs/loa/cfp.shtml
³ http://www.vhcb.org/conservation.html
⁴ http://www.vtfpr.org/reclwcf/index.cfm

The Northern Green Mountains Linkage: Vermont and Quebec
that permanently conserved lands (i.e. those protected in a conservation easement) may also be enrolled in Current Use.

Some communities offer residents an alternative to the Current Use program through a local tax stabilization program. Under this option, a municipality enters into a tax stabilization contract with owners, lessees or operators of existing or new forest, agricultural, or open lands in order to promote forestry and open space preservation. These contracts can be written to stabilize taxes in a variety of ways: by fixing property values, tax rates, or the amount or percentage of annual tax assessed.\(^5\)

### Tips for Getting Started

The methods of protecting land described above can be used to maintain or enhance landscape connectivity for wildlife in your community. Understanding what has already been conserved and targeting additional key areas to focus your efforts is one of the first steps. In order to do this, you’ll need to:

1. **Contact the Staying Connected Initiative for information on key wildlife connectivity areas in your town or region.**
   - If you are in the Greens to Adirondack Mountains or Northern Green Mountains linkages, please contact [Paul Marangelo](mailto:pmarangelo@tnc.org) at The Nature Conservancy (802-229-4425) for assistance.
   - If you are in the Worcesters to Northeast Kingdom linkage, please contact [Jens Hilke](mailto:Jens.Hilke@state.vt.us) at the VT Fish & Wildlife Dept. (802-879-5644) for assistance.

2. **Use the Vermont Natural Resources Atlas to create a map of your town** that shows parcels that have been conserved by federal, state, municipal, and non-profit entities, and parcels that are enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal program. Website: [http://anrmmaps.vermont.gov/websites/anra/](http://anrmmaps.vermont.gov/websites/anra/)

3. **Use BioFinder to identify areas important for wildlife connectivity.** This tool can be used to identify Vermont’s lands and waters that support high priority ecosystems, natural communities, habitats, and species. BioFinder differs from the Natural Resources Atlas in that the program can analyze the data and indicate statewide priority rankings. Website: [http://biofinder.vt.gov/](http://biofinder.vt.gov/)

Once you have these maps, you’ll be able to identify lands that are important for landscape connectivity, but have not yet been protected. The next step is to identify opportunities to protect them through the methods outlined above – conservation easements, municipal conservation funds and town forest designation, public fee acquisition, and encouraging private landowners to enroll in the Current Use program. The Staying Connected Initiative land trust partners – including The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, Vermont Land Trust, and The Conservation Fund – can help! For these organizations’ contact information, see the Resources handout in your folder or download a copy online at [http://stayingconnectedinitiative.org/resources/](http://stayingconnectedinitiative.org/resources/).

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How to Stay Connected

Now that you’ve learned about the importance of landscape connectivity for wildlife and the special role that your community plays in the broader region, please consider getting involved. Without active efforts to maintain and enhance existing landscape connections, both humans and wildlife will lose these valuable areas.

The following actions are ones that anyone can take, regardless of experience level or skills. There is a Resources handout in your folder (or you can download a copy at http://stayingconnectedinitiative.org/resources/) to help you get started and phone numbers in case you get stuck. Good luck and remember that we’re rooting for you!

– The Staying Connected Team

If you are interested in conserving lands within the wildlife corridor:

☐ Reach out to landowners – especially those with lands in or near the wildlife corridor – who have not yet conserved their land, or enrolled their parcel in the Current Use program.¹

Compare your town’s parcel map with its wildlife connectivity map and identify parcels in and near key habitat blocks. Write down the name, address, and parcel ID # for each and then:

  • Check the Agency of Natural Resources’ Natural Resources Atlas (http://anrmaps.vermont.gov/websites/anra/) to determine if any of the parcels have been conserved by easement or enrolled in the Current Use program.²
  
  • Contact the landowners (by letter or door-to-door visit) to share information about: (1) the Staying Connected linkage, (2) the importance of this parcel given its location in/near a habitat block, and (3) tools that are available to help the landowner support connectivity. In particular, you might want to share information on the Current Use Program, estate planning, conservation easements and land trusts.

¹ The “Current Use” or Use Value Appraisal Program is run by the State of Vermont to help ensure that forests and farms are taxed for their productive use, rather than their development value.

² Go to “Show Map Layers,” click on “Forests Parks and Recreation” (beneath the heading “ANR Atlas Layers”), and check the boxes next to “Use Value Appraisal Parcels” and “Conserved Lands.”


If your community is (or will soon be) working on a town plan update:

☐ Discuss wildlife and landscape connectivity in the transportation, energy, and natural resources sections of the town plan.

☐ Include clear goals, policies, and actions that will maintain or enhance connectivity for wildlife.

It is particularly important that policies are clearly stated – these may be used during the Act 250 review process to determine whether a proposed development upholds your town’s stated policies. In this respect, it is best to be decisive in your choice of language (for instance, “development on slopes over 25% shall be prohibited”). Don’t forget that town plans are also consulted for regional reviews, like Act 250 (which addresses proposed developments and large subdivisions) and Section 248 (which addresses proposed electricity generation and transmission, as well as telecommunication projects).

If your community is or will be working on a zoning bylaw update:

☐ Improve existing natural resource zoning districts – Conservation, Forest or Natural Resources Overlay – or rural residential districts in your town.

You can ensure that your existing zoning districts are maintaining or enhancing wildlife by updating related definitions (or adding new ones) and standards within zoning and subdivision regulations. Tip: Don’t forget to address wildlife in your rural residential district, too – studies show that the majority of subdivision and subsequent habitat fragmentation are taking place in these zoning districts in Vermont.

For more information, see Chapter 18 (p. 68) for sample definitions and Chapter 11 (p. 36-40, 73-77) for standards in Community Strategies for Vermont’s Forests and Wildlife: A Guide for Local Action: http://vnrc.org/programs/forests-wildlife/guide/.

For more on subdivision trends in Vermont: http://www.vnrc.org/subdivisionreport.

☐ Create or expand a Conservation, Forest or Natural Resource Overlay Zoning District.

If your town does not have a Conservation, Forest or Natural Resources Overlay District, then your planning commission can propose the creation of one. Similarly, if your town already has one or
more of these zoning districts, but their boundaries do not adequately cover the land within the wildlife corridor, the planning commission can propose the expansion of the district(s). (The selectboard ultimately approves zoning changes.)

➢ For more information, see Chapter 12 (p. 41) for Conservation Districts, Chapter 13 (p. 46) for Forest Districts, and Chapter 14 (p. 50) for Overlay Districts in Community Strategies for Vermont’s Forests and Wildlife: A Guide for Local Action: http://vnrc.org/programs/forests-wildlife/guide/.

If your town has adopted subdivision regulations:

☐ Review your town’s subdivision regulations to see whether they will adequately protect connectivity.

Standards govern aspects of subdivisions (for instance, lot layout, the location of roads and utilities, and the size and location of building envelopes). Examine the standards in your subdivision regulations. Do they ensure that development will be located so that it does not disturb important forest and wildlife resources?

Also, check your zoning and subdivision regulations to see if they allow or require clustering, planned unit developments, or density averaging. These approaches to development consider the resources on the site, and allow flexibility in the layout of lots in order to avoid impacting the resources.


If your town does not have a zoning bylaw or subdivision regulations, but you would like the community to move in this direction:

☐ Encourage your planning commission, selectboard, and most importantly, your neighbors to support the adoption of a zoning bylaw and subdivision regulations.

➢ To learn more about zoning or subdivision regulations, please visit VNRC’s Community Planning Toolbox (http://vnrc.org/resources/community-planning-toolbox/) and the Vermont Planning Information Center (www.vpic.info).

If you would like to address the role of roads within your linkage:

☐ Adopt a road or trail policy or ordinance – one that is not part of the town plan or zoning bylaw – and work to ensure that landscape connectivity is protected by it.
If your community has a town plan, your planning commission can include road or trail policies in it. Additionally, regardless of whether your community has a town plan or zoning regulations, the selectboard has the power to create stand-alone road and trail ordinances. Since roads can fragment the landscape and act as barriers to the safe passage of animals from one forest block to another, they are an important topic to address.


☐ Identify priority road crossings for wildlife.

Once you have identified priority road crossings for wildlife in your town or region, you can focus your efforts to improve crossings in these geographical areas. The Staying Connected Initiative partners can help you. For their contact information, see How to Map Wildlife Data in Your Town in the Resources handout in your folder or download a copy online at: [http://stayingconnectedinitiative.org/resources/](http://stayingconnectedinitiative.org/resources/).

☐ Assess your town’s culverts and bridges for wildlife connectivity and prepare recommendations.

Towns usually replace culverts on an as needed basis. To improve wildlife road crossing safety, you can assess culverts, as well as bridges, and be ready with recommendations on size or materials for the replacement. Recommendations should be presented to the selectboard and the leader of the Road Crew.

Please check with town officials to see whether your community already has a culvert and bridge inventory – if yes, you should work off of this document.


☐ Encourage your regional planning commission (RPC) to incorporate wildlife connectivity into their bridge and culvert prioritization process.

- To learn more about this process, contact your RPC and ask to speak to the transportation planner on staff. To find contact information for your RPC, go to [www.vapda.org](http://www.vapda.org).

Resources & Technical Assistance

Resources

A comprehensive list of resources – including information on planning, mapping and inventory tools, data, and more – can be found in Community Strategies for Vermont’s Forests and Wildlife: A Guide for Local Action on page 78 or online at: http://vnrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Resources.pdf.

Mapping Assistance

➢ How to Find Your Town’s Parcel Map: Check ANR’s online Natural Resources Atlas (http://anrmaps.vermont.gov/websites/anra/) to find your town’s digital parcel map. If your town’s map is not listed in the Atlas, then call or visit your Town Office to request a map.

➢ How To Map Wildlife Data in Your Town: If you are in the Adirondacks to Green Mountains or Northern Green Mountains linkages, please contact Paul Marangelo at The Nature Conservancy (802-229-4425, pmarangelo@tnc.org). If you are in the Worcesters to Kingdom linkage, please contact Jens Hilke at the VT Fish & Wildlife Dept. (802-879-5644, Jens.Hilke@state.vt.us).

Land Protection Assistance

➢ Land Trusts and Conservation Organizations: The following land trusts can help with the development of a conservation easement, a fee sale to a public agency, or with estate planning. If an individual is listed, please contact this person first – he or she works at the land trust and is also a member of the Staying Connected Initiative.

Statewide

o The Conservation Fund (www.conservationfund.org/): Nancy Bell (802-492-3368, nancy_bell@vermontel.net).

o The Nature Conservancy (http://www.nature.org/): Jon Binhammer (802-229-4425 x110, jbinhammer@tnc.org).

o Northeast Wilderness Trust (http://www.newildernesstrust.org/)

o The Trust for Public Land (www.tpl.org): Kate Wanner (802-223-1373 x27, kate.wanner@tpl.org).

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1 Go to “Show Map Layers,” click on “ANR Basemap Data” (beneath the heading “ANR Atlas Layers”), and check the box next to “Parcels (where available).”
The Vermont Land Trust (www.vlt.org): Siobhan Smith (802-262-1217, Siobhan@vlt.org).

Vermont Rivers Conservancy (http://www.vermontriverconservancy.org/)

Worcesters to Kingdom Linkage

- Greensboro Land Trust (http://www.greensborolandtrust.org/)
- Passumpsic Valley Land Trust (http://www.pvlt.org/)

Northern Greens Linkage

- Northern Rivers Land Trust (http://www.northernriverslandtrust.org/)
- Stowe Land Trust (http://www.stowelandtrust.org/)

- County Foresters: For more information about the Use Value Appraisal (“Current Use”) program, contact your county forester. County forester information can be found online at http://www.vtfpr.org/resource/for_fores_countfor.cfm or by calling the Vermont Dept. of Forests, Parks and Recreation (802-828-1531).

Land Use Planning Assistance

- Regional Planning Commissions: Your town is a member of a regional planning commission (RPC), which assists municipalities with land use planning and has a staff that is trained in approaches for sustaining habitat connectivity for wildlife. To find your RPC’s contact information, go to: www.vapda.org.

- Additional Technical Assistance: If you have questions about your town plan, zoning bylaws, or subdivision regulations and how to improve them for wildlife, please contact:
  - Jens Hilke (Jens.Hilke@state.vt.us) at the VT Fish & Wildlife Dept., 802-879-5644.
  - Kate McCarthy, AICP (kmccarthy@vnrc.org), Jamey Fidel (jfidel@vnrc.org), and Emma Zavez (ezavez@vnrc.org) at the Vermont Natural Resources Council, 802-223-2328.

Transportation Assistance

- How to Find Wildlife Related Traffic Accidents Data For Your Town/Region: The transportation planner at your RPC should be able to find this data for you and map it. For contact information, please see “Regional Planning Commission” (above).

- How to Identify Priority Wildlife Crossings in Your Town/Region: Please contact the Staying Connected Initiative for further assistance; contact information is listed under “How To Map Wildlife Data in Your Town” (above.)

- Additional Technical Assistance: If you have questions about transportation solutions for wildlife, please contact the following Staying Connected Initiative members:
  - Jens Hilke (Jens.Hilke@state.vt.us) at the VT Fish & Wildlife Dept., 802-879-5644.
  - James Brady (james.brady@state.vt.us) at the VT Agency of Transportation (VTrans), 802-828-3978.
Time and again, people point to forests and wildlife when sharing what they love and value in our communities. Young and old, natives and newcomers, well-to-do and just scraping by, everyone seems to share this passion. Indeed, our natural resources define our quality of life. Clear air and clean water keep our families healthy; forests provide countless recreation opportunities (including hiking, hunting, fishing, photography, and snowmobiling); and the forest products, agriculture and tourism industries anchor our local economy. In Vermont, wildlife associated recreation alone generates more than $400 million in revenues annually.

The Staying Connected Initiative is a partnership of local, state and national organizations and agencies working with communities to encourage the stewardship of these precious resources.

At the crossroads...

Just as healthy local economies often require healthy regional economies, healthy local wildlife populations require healthy regional populations. Year in and year out, we see wildlife outside our doors because of the high quality habitat across the region.

We live at the crossroads of an extensive wildlife habitat network spanning the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada—from New York’s Tug Hill Plateau and Adirondacks, across Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, and north to Québec’s Gaspé Peninsula and the Canadian Maritime Provinces.

What’s a wildlife network? It’s the combination of blocks of forest and connecting lands that many animals need for sufficient food, cover, and access to mates. The forest blocks provide prime wildlife habitat while the connecting lands—often small forest and woodland patches, wetlands and river corridors—allow wildlife movement across the landscape between larger forested blocks.

We live at the crossroads of an extensive wildlife habitat network
A changing landscape

Our forests have mostly re-grown from intensive clearing in the 1800s. In response, wildlife that were once nearly gone from the state have returned. But now, modern development in the form of new roads and scattered development is fragmenting our forests in ways more difficult to reverse. The result is increasingly isolated “islands.”

Wildlife and the changing landscape

While squirrels, blue jays and raccoons thrive in our backyards, many wildlife species, including black bear, moose, bobcat and fisher, will not survive over the long term in small forest patches. These species and many more need to move freely across the landscape to survive—between summer and winter food sources, to find mates, and in response to environmental changes. For this reason, in the face of increasing habitat fragmentation, the connections between larger patches of forest and between different habitats are critical for healthy wildlife populations.

People and the changing landscape

Because our communities were built on a strong connection to the land, we can see the effects of increasing forest fragmentation. Fewer jobs tie us to the land and we have fewer opportunities to connect with nature and our region’s history – we are losing farms and farmers, logging is more difficult with decreasing lot sizes, and hikers, hunters and snowmobilers encounter challenges gaining access to land.

The Staying Connected Initiative—linking it all together

Staying Connected seeks to connect landscapes for communities of wildlife and people. We are working with municipalities, citizens and partner organizations to maintain, enhance and restore landscape connections across our region. While wildlife habitat is our primary focus, we seek to collaborate with those interested in maintaining a healthy landscape for related purposes as well. By tailoring our efforts to each community’s needs, interests, and values, we offer a variety of tools and support. These may include:

- Raising awareness about local natural history, wildlife needs and movement patterns, and other land-based topics through community events
- Identifying local wildlife movement areas and improving key wildlife road crossings
- Assisting landowners interested in protecting or managing their land for the benefit of wildlife and other natural resources
- Providing technical assistance to municipalities interested in maintaining landscape connections

If you are interested in wildlife and maintaining connections to the land, or simply want to learn more about Staying Connected, please visit: www.StayingConnectedInitiative.org