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The benefit of connected forests and waterways

By | October 09, 2016

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A few weeks ago, the New England Governors and Eastern Canadian premiers convened in Boston for their 40th annual conference to work strategically on pressing regional challenges and opportunities.

This year, The Nature Conservancy, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, and the Staying Connected Initiative spearheaded an effort that resulted in Gov. Peter Shumlin proposing a regional resolution highlighting the importance of connected forests and waterways in the face of climate change — which passed with strong bi-national support.

Why is this significant? Because just as you and I have to get from place to place for work, school and family, wildlife needs to move around to find food, shelter and mates. Many native fish need to get upstream in our rivers to spawn, and critters as small as salamanders and as big as moose need to move seasonally to find habitat for breeding and over-wintering. And with climate change, animals and plants need to be able to move across the landscape to find areas with suitable conditions for them to survive.

But with development that fragments our forests, waterways that are obstructed by dams and undersized culverts, and roads that can create insurmountable barriers, our cherished wildlife often faces big obstacles to moving freely across the landscape. The key to their future is for us to work across political and institutional borders to sustain forests and waterways that are still connected, and to forge reconnection in places where it has been severed.

Here in Vermont, The Nature Conservancy, the state's Fish and Wildlife Department and Agency of Transportation and many

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others are using a blend of approaches to sustain landscape connections. We use cutting-edge conservation science to help identify the highest priority places on which to focus. We have deployed more than 100 game cameras along key road segments statewide to assess wildlife movement, with a goal of finding ways to help animals cross safely from one side to the other and reduce the risk of collisions for drivers. We're working with landowners to voluntarily conserve key parcels that help maintain forested "stepping stones" and pathways. And we're working with towns and regional planning commissions to incorporate connectivity into land use plans and policies.

These connections are a benefit for nature, but they are equally important for Vermonters and our neighbors. Connected forests are a boon for hunters and outdoor recreationists, as they are for the maple and wood products industries — a cornerstone of our economy. They also absorb rainfall and snowmelt, helping to reduce downstream flooding and protect water quality, and slow climate change by taking carbon out of the atmosphere. Connected waterways support healthier populations of fish for anglers and expand opportunities for paddlers, while also improving the flood resiliency of our communities.

By maintaining and restoring nature's connections, we are helping all of us who live here — people, animals, plants — to thrive.

Phil Huffman is director of landscape conservation and policy with The Nature Conservancy in Vermont. To learn more about the benefits of connected habitat for wildlife and people, visit: stayingconnectedinitiative.org.

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