

THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU AND YOUR TOWN



Bunker Hill

David Hunt

A GUIDE FOR MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

This booklet is a guide for how your Town can conserve the ecological, social, and economic values of the Rensselaer Plateau. It is intended to help elected officials, planning and zoning boards, volunteers, and others to use the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan to address the needs of your community.

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community
rensselaerplateau.org

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In September 2013 the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance completed a Regional Conservation Plan with the intent of providing information to municipalities, community organizations and individuals regarding the ecological, economic, and social importance of the Rensselaer Plateau. The following pages provide a brief snapshot of the plan, but more importantly they provide information, tools, and real-world examples that you can use as a municipal official. Ultimately, we hope this document will spur conversations that lead to action to create a prosperous future for your community.

FIRST STEPS TO USING THE PLAN

As you read through this guide and the plan, consider the following first steps:

- Form a committee to review the Rensselaer Plateau Conservation Plan for relevance in planning, policy, and programs in your community and present findings and recommendations to local leadership.
- Recognize that natural resources cross municipal boundaries and take advantage of opportunities to talk to your neighbors and collaborate on issues of mutual concern.
- Submit comments and suggestions on the plan and how you are using it to: comments@renselaerplateau.org

WHAT IS THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU?

The Rensselaer Plateau spans 11 municipalities in eastern Rensselaer County, New York. It is a geologically distinct upland region with an escarpment steeply rising from the surrounding lower elevations marking its boundary. The Plateau's relatively high elevations (1,000 - 1,800 feet) and cool climate, acidic soils, and its poor drainage contribute to plants, forests, and wetlands more similar to New York's Northern Forest than to the surrounding local area.

WHO IS THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU ALLIANCE?

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA) is a diverse group of organizations and people living on or near the Plateau with interests to conserve the qualities and character of this region and the benefits it provides. The RPA seeks to work cooperatively with municipalities, groups, and residents to provide information and promote actions that protect the environmental and economic values provided by the Plateau for the long term.



ABOUT THE REGIONAL CONSERVATION PLAN

The Regional Conservation Plan was developed through collaborative effort and community involvement under the guidance and oversight of the RPA. The plan includes studies of the region's significant ecological communities, economy, and community values, as well as historical and demographic research.

Many aspects of this work are ongoing, including:

- (1) Fostering communication and collaboration within and between municipalities, landowners and stakeholders about regional resources;
- (2) Working with local governments, landowners, and NY state to raise conservation awareness;
- (3) Recognizing the value of planning to conserving the Plateau's qualities and character; and
- (4) Identifying and developing the necessary tools and information that municipalities and landowners might need to achieve their goals.



A WALK THROUGH THE PLAN'S SECTIONS FOR MUNICIPALITIES

- **A Brief History of the Plateau (pg 11)** provides historical background and context.
- **The Plateau Today (pg 17)** analyzes current demographic trends and data.
- **The Ecological Assessment (pg 23)** describes significant natural areas, important forest-interior areas, ecological communities, and much more.
- **The Economic Study (pg 31)** documents the region's direct and indirect economic activities and values ecosystem services (or non-market benefits, such as clean water, storm water handling, clean air, etc.) of the Plateau.
- **Tools and Techniques for Municipalities (pg 47)** provides specific examples of activities for municipalities to consider to protect the Plateau's natural resources.
- **Implementation (pg 56)** suggests how municipalities can move forward using the Regional Conservation Plan as a resource to inform their planning efforts.

See the back cover for how to find a copy of the Conservation Plan.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE PLAN

- The ecological study identified 73 of New York's 174 types of wetlands, forests, and other natural areas, including numerous uncommon and high quality habitats.
- Community workshops found that local residents most appreciate the Plateau's recreational, biological diversity, and economic values.
- The forest products industry contributes over \$9.2 million annually to the local economy, more than any other economic sector on the Plateau.
- Plateau ecosystems provide clean air and water, flood control, nutrient cycling, and wildlife habitat - natural benefits valued at over \$300 million annually.



Public Workshop - Fred DeMay

EXAMPLES OF HOW THE PLAN CAN HELP MUNICIPALITIES

How can the plan be used to inform land-use planning and decision-making?

By gaining a better understanding of the contributions of an area's natural resources to industry, tourism, and recreation, local boards can make more informed decisions on land-use matters. Using information from the Ecological Assessment and some basic conservation principles, local boards can help reduce forest fragmentation and avoid building in the most sensitive areas. Town boards can use the following tools to apply the plan's data and recommendations to land-use planning:

- Recognize the ecological, economic, and social benefits of the Plateau in a **Town Comprehensive Plan**.
- Allow **Conservation Development** and require conservation analysis to identify the least sensitive areas for building.
- Appoint a **Conservation Advisory Council** to help planning and zoning boards with conservation analysis and using the maps.
- Develop a **Critical Environmental Area** under State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) to raise awareness of the most sensitive areas during environmental review.
- Promote **Sustainable Forestry** as a use.

CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

- *Avoid or minimize forest fragmentation*
- *Maintain links between large forest blocks*
- *Establish and maintain broad buffer zones around sensitive areas (e.g., streams, wetlands)*
- *Minimize impervious surface area*
- *Concentrate development along existing roads and in altered areas*
- *Identify and protect habitats and species of conservation concern*

Adapted from Kiviat, E. and Stevens, G. (2001) Biodiversity Assessment Manual for the Hudson River Estuary Corridor. NYSDEC, Albany, NY. www.hudsonia.org

The ecological data can also help planning and zoning boards in project review, including determining significance and minimizing impacts during the SEQR process. An example of how a town might do this while reviewing a subdivision proposal is provided on the facing page.

How can the planning board, zoning board, and other committees use the maps?

The ecological assessment produced outstanding data and maps for ecological features spanning the Rensselaer Plateau's 118,000 acres. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data will be available to create maps to support local and regional planning. During project review, local boards should consider:

- Using the **Significant Natural Areas Map** to identify the ecological priority level of the site and surrounding area. Refer to Table 2 in the plan (pg 25) for ecological management recommendations based on each priority level.
- Using the **Natural Ecological Communities Map** to identify habitats present on the site and in the surrounding area. Refer to the NY Natural Heritage Program website (<http://guides.nynhp.org>) for community descriptions, photos, development considerations, and management recommendations.
- Using the other maps (valuable ecological complexes, large forest blocks, important forest interiors, and stream networks) to identify other important natural features.



For help with the plan's maps or GIS data, contact: maps@rensselaerplateau.org

An example of how a municipal planning board could evaluate and guide a proposed subdivision

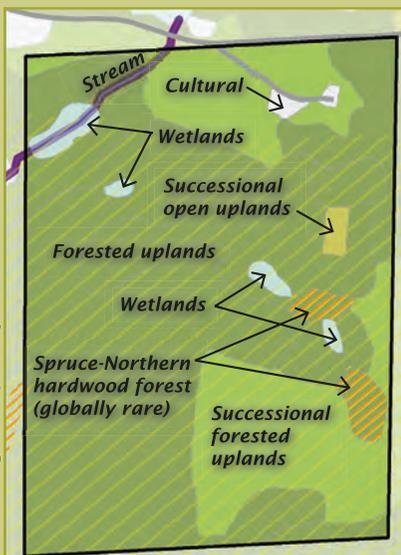
Planning boards can work with applicants to design subdivisions that meet economic and ecological goals. Begin discussions with applicants early in the project review process, before there has been major investment in project design. The following example applies the land-use planning tools and conservation principles on the facing page.

A **conservation analysis** could use data from the Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan to identify the most sensitive areas on a potential subdivision site. This map shows data from the ecological communities map, the forest interior map, and the stream network map. Planning boards and applicants can use the NY Natural Heritage Program Conservation Guides to learn more about stewardship of ecological communities. For example, for the Spruce-Northern Hardwood forest shown here, the guide suggests “minimizing the width of roads and road corridors extending into forests.”

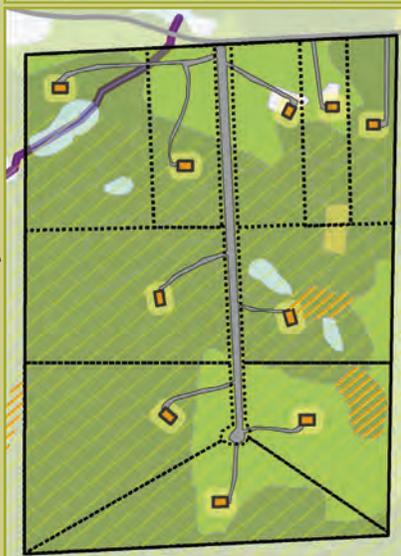
A **conventional layout** maximizes use of the land and fragments the forest interior block (yellow-hatched area). Avoidable impacts include clearing of the globally-rare spruce-northern hardwood forest, the driveway stream crossing, and building in a wetland buffer. Lot sizes are also too small to support sustainable forestry.

The **conservation or cluster development** concentrates the same number of houses closer to the road, reducing fragmentation of the large forest block, while maintaining privacy. Buffers are used to protect wetlands and streams from runoff. A voluntary conservation agreement could be used to prevent future subdivision of the most ecologically sensitive areas on the property. Such an agreement would help maintain the Plateau’s forests while allowing traditional uses (such as sustainable forestry and maple sugaring) and keeping the parcel on the tax rolls.

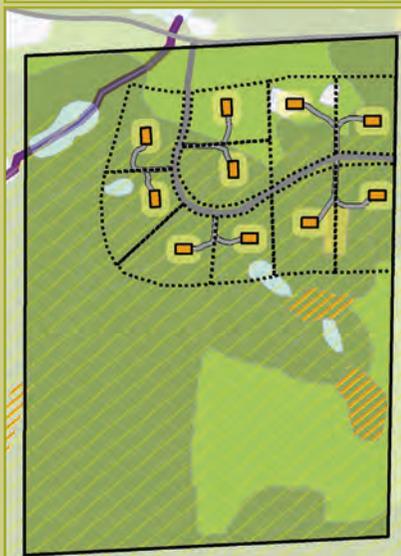
Existing Property



Conventional Development



Conservation Subdivision



How can the plan help guide intermunicipal cooperation?

Some of the opportunities for expanded intermunicipal and other partnerships include:

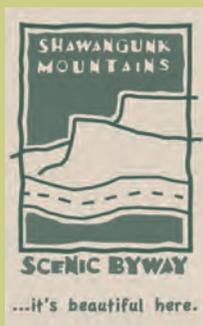
- **Create a set of shared land-use and sustainable development management tools** such as rural conservation development design guidelines—building upon the ecological assessment and other information assets developed in this plan.
- **Undertake cooperative planning and economic development projects with neighboring communities**—for example, creating a tourism development strategy.
- **Expand cooperative arrangements with the RPA and its partners**—in particular with local land trusts to help them help land owners protect the land for future generations.
- **Help identify and advocate at the state and federal level for programs and needed legislation** that will help us to conserve and promote our area’s resources—through the NYS Open Space Plan, the NYS Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), the NYSDEC Hudson River Estuary Program, the Hudson River Valley Greenway, federal farm and forest land conservation programs, and other kindred programs. This is a special region, with resources on a scale that is beyond the present funding capacity of our local governments and land trusts to adequately conserve.



Skiing at Pine Ridge - unknown photographer

An Example of Intermunicipal Cooperation

In the Shawangunk Mountain area near New Paltz, 11 towns and 2 villages have signed an intermunicipal agreement to work together to help promote and preserve the quality of the region. The communities have organized around the mountains and, interestingly, along the scenic highway routes by forming a state and federally-recognized “scenic byway.” The Shawangunk Mountains Scenic Byway - <http://mtnscenicbyway.org> - ties together these communities in the Hudson Valley. It serves to raise awareness about the resources found in the region and to generate economic activity in the form of increased tourism.



How can the plan help support and expand economic development efforts?

The plan provides the ecological, social, and economic information to support existing economic development efforts in your Town and sheds light on potential new opportunities. With this information, your Town can tailor economic development efforts to meet the needs and interests of your constituents as well as foster partnerships across municipal boundaries. Here is a sampling of efforts that are supported by the plan:



- **Create a Buy Local Forest Products program.** Forestry has the largest economic impact on the Plateau (pg 35). That impact could be further increased by creating a program to encourage local consumers to purchase within the Plateau first.
- **Celebrate yesteryear.** The plan has a robust section on the history of the Plateau that could be a starting point for developing an historic marker program to promote the area's rich history.
- **Promote tourism.** Over 300,000 visitors come to the Plateau annually to recreate (pg 19, *Economic Impact Study*), yet local lodging and other visitor amenities are severely limited. Recreational enjoyment of the Plateau will help nurture local businesses, contributing to a sustainable economic future for local communities. Several promotional strategies are described in the plan.
- **Create a Regional Trail System.** Trails can also be a major driver for tourism and economic development. The plan discusses development of a Regional Trail System on the Plateau as a strategy for enhancing awareness, enjoyment, and ultimately stewardship of the Plateau's unique resources.
- **Support new economic development efforts.** You may have other great economic development ideas (agrotourism, agroforestry, other possibilities). The information in the conservation plan may help in planning or may help strengthen grant applications or public outreach.

The RPA is eager to partner with towns and other organizations to help facilitate these and other economic development proposals that further contribute to a sustainable economic future for the Plateau's communities. Please see the back cover for our contact information.



Traverse Hike - Fred DeMay

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance wishes to thank the many contributors to the User Guides and the Regional Conservation Plan, especially the local officials and residents who participated in the public outreach process. We are committed to helping the towns of the Plateau by making connections, providing resources, and sharing information. Please do not hesitate to contact us; we want to know how we can help you make your communities more prosperous, while maintaining the qualities and character that we love.

WHERE CAN I OBTAIN A COPY OF THE PLAN?

<http://renselaerplateau.org/RensselaerPlateau/ConservationPlan.aspx>
Hard copies are available at your town hall and public library.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Strong, K. (2008) *Conserving Natural Areas and Wildlife in Your Community* available at: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/50083.html>

Daniels, K. (2005) *A Municipal Official's Guide to Forestry in New York State* available at: www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/guidetoforestry.pdf

Pace Land Use Law Center publications - <http://www.law.pace.edu/landuse>

NYSDEC Hudson River Estuary Program - <http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/5094.html>

Hudson River Valley Greenway - <http://www.hudsongreenway.ny.gov>

Hudsonia Ltd. - <http://hudsonia.org>



More information is available on the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance's Website: <http://renselaerplateau.org>

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

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*Black-throated Green warbler photo by Gordon Ellmers,
Spotted Salamander photo by Camazine at en.wikipedia*



THE RENSSELAER PLATEAU...

- ...is approximately 118,000 acres.*
- ...is the 5th largest forested region in NY.*
- ...is a US Forest Legacy Area.*
- ...is about 445 million years old.*
- ...is home to over 8,000 people.*
- ...is approximately 90% forested.*
- ...is approximately 90% privately owned.*
- ...is amazing!*